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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

Part II, After the Cross

SIX

The Savior Prevailing

As you may have suspected, in this second part we will primarily be investigating the book of Acts and the epistles. It is there that we discover the full revelation of all that was accomplished through Jesus' death.

One might ask why Jesus didn't reveal all that His death would accomplish before He died. The answer is that He did reveal, somewhat, the significance of His death, and no doubt would have liked to explain more than He did. His closest friends, however, had a difficult time even accepting that He *would* die, much less accepting any facts about what His death would accomplish.

As we survey the Gospels, it is clear that no one believed Jesus would rise from the dead,¹ in spite of the fact He had promised His disciples on several occasions He would be resurrected after three days.² Therefore, Jesus could only feed His disciples as much truth as they could digest, and was obliged to wait until after His resurrection to reveal, through His post-resurrection appearances and the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, everything He desired. As Jesus said to His disciples during the Last Supper,

“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:12-13).

As we survey Acts and the apostles' letters, we will continue our quest to uncover the necessity, significance, and centrality of the cross. It is inevitable that we will compare the modern gospel message with the original one that was proclaimed by the apostles. First, let's consider the events of Jesus' resurrection.

¹For example, see Mark 16:10-14; John 20:9.

²See Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32.

Bad Friday

As Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, no one would have ever suspected that eventually that day would be commemorated by Christians worldwide as "Good Friday." There hardly seemed to be anything good in what had transpired.

The amazing miracle-working man, the one who seemed to be Israel's long-awaited Messiah, was dead and gone. Fear, despair, and perplexity filled the hearts of the disciples. Mark tells us that they were "mourning and weeping" (Mark 16:10). The man they had faithfully followed for three years had been executed as a criminal. Incredibly, He had walked right into it. Now all hope of establishing the long-awaited kingdom of God was dashed to pieces.

Those of us who know the end of the story can hardly appreciate the drama portrayed in the Gospels. When Jesus rose from the grave on Sunday morning, first appearing at His tomb to Mary and a few other women, and later that day to Peter and the disciples, the world became a much different place. Sorrow turned to joy.

Jesus made some very significant statements during His post-resurrection appearances, many of which were designed to unveil the significance of His death and resurrection. Some of those to whom Jesus spoke probably didn't initially grasp the full significance of what He said—they were just glad He was alive—but eventually the pieces began to fit together.

Christ's First Appearance

The first person to whom Jesus spoke on Sunday morning was Mary Magdalene. She was the first to discover the empty tomb but assumed Jesus' body had been stolen, adding sorrow to her sorrow. However, as she stood weeping at the entrance to the tomb, suddenly Jesus appeared behind her inquiring why she was weeping and for whom she was looking (as if He didn't know!)

Never dreaming it was Jesus speaking, Mary initially thought He was the gardener. When He called her name, however, Mary looked again. Realizing who He was, she cried out, "Teacher!" and fell at His feet, worshiping Him, now with tears of joy.

Jesus spoke:

"Stop clinging to Me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

It seems that Mary had a grip on Jesus' feet and did not intend to let go!

Notice that Jesus referred to His disciples as *His brethren* and to His Father as *their Father*. Something had taken place in the past three days that had given the disciples a new relationship with God. Unknown to them, they had been crucified with Christ, died with Christ, buried with Christ, and now raised from the dead with Christ. Their sins had been cancelled out on the cross; their debt had been paid in full; they had died in Christ and now were born again in Him. They had become God's very own children, members of His family. Jesus was literally their spiritual Brother, and God was actually their spiritual Father.

This is brought out fully in the epistles. Jesus identified Himself with us, and we are vitally united with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. He took our sin that we might have imputed to us His righteousness:

Having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore *all died*....He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:14, 21).

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Gal. 2:20).

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, *made us alive together with Christ* (by grace you have been saved), *and raised us up with Him*, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:4-6).

And in Him you have been made complete...*having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions...He made you *alive together with Him*, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Col. 2:10a, 12-14).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy *has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you (1 Pet. 1:3-4).

I heard a well-known radio Bible teacher relate an incident he experienced while once touring Jerusalem with a group of Christians. They were visiting the site of the garden tomb, and their guide asked if anyone had ever been there before. This Bible teacher spoke out, "I have!" The guide then proceeded to ask him when, and he replied, "About two thousand years ago!"

Now there was a Bible teacher who understood his Bible! You've been there too, if you are "in Christ." It was through Christ's death that our forgiveness was made possible, and all the other blessings we've inherited. That includes our spiritual rebirth, which in God's mind was consummated at Jesus' resurrection.

The cross was the starting place for every blessing we have in Christ. That's why they call the day He died *Good Friday*.

Explaining Things Concerning Himself

When we combine the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, we find that Mary Magdalene, upon discovering the empty tomb, ran to inform Peter and John of her discovery. She returned to the tomb once more with Peter and John, who, upon entering, saw the empty wrappings of Jesus' body. All of them departed, but Mary lingered behind. That is when Jesus made His first appearance.³

His second appearance seems to have been to the other women who arrived shortly after Mary had run to inform Peter and John. Jesus appeared to them after their angelic vision at the tomb, on their way back to the city. All we know of Jesus' conversation then is that He commanded them to instruct His disciples to leave for Galilee, promising to appear to them there.⁴

³ See John 20:1-18.

⁴ See Matt. 28:9-10.

Jesus' third appearance that day was to Peter, sometime after Peter had inspected the empty tomb. However, the Bible doesn't tell us anything Jesus said during that third appearance (see Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5).

His fourth Sunday appearance was sometime in the afternoon when He joined two disciples who were walking to the nearby village of Emmaus. In a miraculous way, they were prevented from initially recognizing Him. As they conversed, Jesus pretended to be ignorant of the events of the last three days:

And one of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that He was alive. And some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see" (Luke 24:18-24).

These men should have been rejoicing that the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah's sufferings and resurrection had been fulfilled, but unfortunately, their knowledge of those predictions was sorely deficient. Jesus then responded to their perplexity:

"O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).

What a sensational Bible study that must have been! The two disciples later reminisced, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

How their faces must have lit up as it gradually dawned on them that Jesus' death and resurrection was God's predetermined plan. When their "eyes were opened" to recognize that it was Jesus who was speaking to them, He suddenly vanished. They immediately hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples.

This fourth appearance is very significant because it was then that Jesus began His post-resurrection teaching ministry. These two disciples were privileged to learn of numerous messianic references in the Old Testament. In fact, Jesus was particularly interested in enlightening them to scriptures that predicted His sufferings and resurrection. Jesus was preparing His disciples to preach the gospel, and those scriptures would be the basis of their preaching.

According to the Scriptures

Jesus' final Sunday appearance was that evening when He suddenly stood in the midst of the disciples who were hiding "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19).

He greeted their surprise by saying, "Peace to you," and then "reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen" (Mark 16:14).

Again we find Jesus making reference to the prophecies He fulfilled in His death and resurrection:

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:44-47).

The phrase, “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” is certainly intriguing. Either Jesus supernaturally gave them instant understanding of the Old Testament messianic types and prophecies, or, more likely, He went through all the Scriptures, explaining them, just as He had done with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Regardless, more than anything else, Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that His death and resurrection were foreordained by God and that now repentance for forgiveness of sins could be proclaimed in His name. Within a few weeks, Jesus would commission His disciples to take the gospel to the entire world, and, of necessity, they must have a clear understanding of what that gospel is.

It is of equal importance that we understand these fundamental truths as well. I’m concerned, however, that many people, and even many pastors, have forgotten or neglected these foundational truths. When a preacher invites people to accept Jesus with the enticement of a better life and some peace of mind but never mentions Christ’s death, resurrection, or the forgiveness of sins, then he has not, according to biblical standards, preached the gospel. Unless he preaches the authentic gospel, how can people be authentically saved?

As we survey the book of Acts, we will notice repeatedly that the core of the apostles’ message was Christ’s death and resurrection. In addition, we will see how they repeatedly appealed to the Old Testament scriptures that predicted Jesus’ death and resurrection as proof that Jesus was indeed the Savior. This is the foundation of our faith, just as the apostle Paul wrote:

For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received, that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures* (1 Cor. 15:3-4, emphasis added).

Notice Paul appealed to the Scriptures twice: once for the death and once for the resurrection of Christ.

The Great Commission

Jesus made a number of other appearances after the initial five on the day of His resurrection. We are told by Luke (in the book of Acts) that Jesus appeared to the apostles “over a period of forty days...speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

It was sometime during those appearances that Jesus commissioned His disciples to take the gospel to every nation. Significantly, on at least two occasions, Jesus commanded the apostles to baptize their converts (see Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16).

When we read through the book of Acts, we find that the apostles consistently obeyed Jesus’ instruction, immediately baptizing anyone who professed genuine faith in Christ.

This is much more important than many today realize, which is why so many ministers don't quickly baptize new believers, and why some never do.

Why did Jesus command the baptism of new believers? There are several reasons, but one often overlooked is that baptism should insure that preachers will preach the true gospel, and that converts will understand the true message of the gospel.

Baptism is representative of the believer's identification with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (see Col. 2:10-14; Rom. 6:3-11). In hearing the gospel, a person should hear about Christ's death and resurrection and that Jesus was his substitute, identifying Himself with sinners so they might be justly forgiven. Baptism then provides the new believer a "corresponding action" to express his faith in the message he has heard. Through baptism, he is saying, "I believe that Jesus identified with me, and from now on I identify myself with Him."

Why is it that so many who preach "the gospel" don't invite those who say they believe in Christ to be baptized immediately? Simply because baptism isn't a logical end to their message. It would make no sense to the new "convert" because he hasn't heard the true gospel of Jesus' substitutionary death and His resurrection.

When we proclaim the true gospel, it should come as no surprise if those who want to be saved respond with the words (as did the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 who heard the gospel from Philip's lips): "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36). How many of our new converts, if we instructed them to be baptized, would respond, "Whatever for?"

Only when the authentic gospel is proclaimed will they understand why they should be baptized, because only then will they understand the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the next chapter, we'll further compare our modern methods with those of the apostles whom Christ commissioned.