

A SONRISE MESSAGE

(Notes from a previous “church lawn” Sunrise Service message)

Why is the good news of the Gospel rejected, unwanted, not seen as good news at all by the vast majority? We who are blessed to walk in the righteousness of Christ - who have been saved by God’s grace - must continually remind ourselves of the essential contrasts which the message of the gospel provokes (2Co 2:15-16, and others). Doing so enhances our appreciation for the eternal changes it has worked in our own lives, and prepares and equips us to spread the message more effectively to others - as God desires and commands, for His glory and honor. We should not be surprised or discouraged by what we ought to expect. We must prepare to overcome the obstacles and roadblocks which we know will be there.

Rom 5:6-8 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

What’s “wrong” with the message of this passage? Shouldn’t it be good news? But of course, it actually *is* good news - great and *profound* news! However, the world analyzes it like this:

First, it sees us characterized as “powerless,” “ungodly” and “sinners,” and replies, “Who, me? Who you callin’ ...?!” Next, it reads, “Christ died for us,” and says, “No thanks - that wasn’t necessary. Not for me, anyhow.”

The bottom line difference between the saved and the lost is this: We enjoy being identified with Christ; they want Him to keep His distance. We accept God’s characterization of us; the lost seek to argue with Him.

The scriptures, in many places and in various ways, invite us (challenge us!) to be identified with Christ (Rom 6:3-5, as just one example). Many folks who are not saved - but nevertheless have a “fear of hell” (or “whatever”) - don’t mind being identified with the benefits of the finished

work of Christ on the cross. (Indeed, they *want* to be identified with them!) Although they certainly don't speak of, or consider the benefits in such terms (i.e., "the finished work of Christ on the cross"), they would like to believe that they have somehow qualified for God's kingdom.

Such folks, however, don't understand or accept the profound doctrines of the bible in truth; from the accurate and complete view of scripture. So, while they do want in on the *benefits*, they don't want to be *in Christ*; at least, not in any true sense; not on God's terms. In fact, they want no part of *anything* which requires them to acknowledge God's sovereignty; that is, their ultimate accountability to God and His righteous directives and judgment. They have no real appreciation for, or true allegiance to Christ - and ultimately, they really aren't interested in Christ at all.

Instead, they actually seek to distance themselves from Him. And yet, they still desire to sidle up to the benefit package which He has provided for true believers - which cost Him His very life; a life *He willingly laid down*. In response to Phil 2:8 and the "Christ died for us" of this passage, they say, "No thanks, it wasn't necessary, not for me anyway."

Well, we know, of course, that His death for us was *absolutely* necessary. But the world rejects that premise because to embrace it requires acceptance of, and concession and commitment to God's Word - and, of course, to God Himself. Worse, it means an entirely changed world view and lifestyle: repentance ("Oh no!"), turning away from sinful desires ("Not yet."), and obedience to a righteous life in Christ ("No way!").

And yet, this passage presents still another problem for the lost: Who exactly did Jesus lay His life down for? The text says, "the *ungodly*" - they say, "not me!" The text says the lost who were "*powerless*" - they say, "Why, I've never been ...!" (as laughable as Jn 8:33).

Jn 8:31-33 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Just as the Pharisees of Jesus' day refused to acknowledge their enslavement, those who reject the gospel today deny their powerlessness. You see, it was silly for the Pharisees to protest Jesus' point that the truth

could set them free on the basis that they had never been enslaved. On a practical level, they were slaves to the Romans at that very time, and to numerous and various others throughout their history!

More importantly, however - and with profound, eternal consequences - Jesus was addressing their enslavement to *sin*. Like those Pharisees, the lost of our day refuse to recognize, accept or address their sin problem. Though powerless, they deceive themselves that they are powerful enough to master their very lives - in this world and the next!

They cannot (or refuse to) understand or appreciate the true power required to overcome sin and the trials of life; to secure their place in God's kingdom. These can only be effected by the power of almighty God; a power displayed at the cross in a way which Paul describes in Col 2:15 as a *triumph* which made a public spectacle of the forces of evil!

These powerless and lost ones have not understood that the lack of true peace, happiness and fulfillment in their lives is due to their foolish attempts to accomplish, with their own feeble power, that which requires the power of God. Their efforts will never succeed, and will only lead to greater frustration and hopeless despair. Ultimately, their sin must be removed.

Still, the modern world offers many pleasures and great provision and prosperity unimaginable a relatively short time ago. Sadly, these simply present a greater temptation - and they draw folks into a stronger, more dangerous trap: Many now believe they actually *have* attained or *can* attain to some satisfactory level of achievement and fulfillment apart from God.

But the illusion quickly betrays its deception when the inevitable difficulties of life arise. Though rare, some (considered "fortunate" by the world) experience their only "difficulty" when finally faced with their mortality. It would have been better for them to have encountered difficulty sooner; to have assessed their true state more accurately, and in a timelier manner. Ultimately, no one can sustain himself; no one can escape the judgment of God (Heb 4:13; 9:27; Rom 14:10-12). Everyone will spend eternity either in heaven or hell. Behind all things always is the sovereign power of God.

Yet, while God does make His power freely available to us, He does so for *His* purposes - not ours. As long as man continues to believe that he is his own master, able to satisfy all his needs and desires out of his own power, he will never avail himself of the only power which can truly set him free.

Of course, the world can't, or doesn't want to see or understand any of this. To them, the cross is foolishness (1Co 1:18). They have been blinded to the truth (2Co 4:4); specifically and especially the truth of their need of salvation - and a Savior who is able to meet that need. If they do consider the sin issue at all, they trust in their own ability to deal with it; either through works, religious activities, invented "spiritualism" and self-helps, the remaking of God into an image they will accept, or through brazen attempts to dictate to God the limits of His power, sovereignty and judgment. Some simply decide to ignore the issue altogether; to cross that bridge if/when they come to it - confident that they will be able to come up with a solution.

However, we who are gathered here choose to be identified with Christ and the message of the gospel which emanates from what occurred on the cross 2000 years ago. Our presence here on the lawn is just a small way of expressing that identification. Even in our essentially godless culture, many who pass by and notice us will know why we are gathered here on this special occasion: It is because we belong to Him; we claim His name.

(When this message was presented, the following songs were sung where their words are inserted in this writing.)

So, let us consider the questions and implications of our first song:

Were You There

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?

When I think how they crucified my Lord

Were you there when He rose up from the dead?

Oh - ooooooh - sometimes it causes me to tremble - tremble - tremble

Were you there ...

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We have just sung one of the profound truths of the gospel - described for us just one chapter further on from where we were in Romans earlier:

Rom 6:4-8 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin- ⁷because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. ⁸Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

And we find an even greater assurance in:

Eph 2:6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Our final destination is a “done deal” from God’s view! - as in Rom 8:30 and Col 3:1)

Theologically, the answer to the question, “Were you there?”, is that each of us *was* there - and, if we are saved, on *both* sides of the issue. First, in our sinfulness, we helped crucify Him; that is, we made His crucifixion necessary. Our sin nailed Him to the cross and caused Him to be pierced, to die and be buried. But second, when we accepted Him and His work on our behalf on *His* terms, we were there in His resurrection unto eternal life, as well (as we sang and just read). Yet, 2Pe 4 and others teach us that, in this life, we will also participate in the sufferings of Christ. And yet, ironically, this is one of the surest signs that we share in His eternal life.

Now that we have experienced this profound power of the cross in our lives, we should be filled with a passionate vigilance to remain near to its true and profound, eternal meaning and comfort; no longer the cross of death, but a message of life. This is what we celebrate today; yes, we do remember the death, but we celebrate the life which overcame death - once for all. The hymn, “Near the Cross,” expresses these sentiments well. In the 3rd verse, we find the essence of the song’s theme: Speaking of the events of the cross, it says, “bring its scenes before me.” We are asking God there to simply keep us reminded of, in appreciation for, and living in light of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf in his perfect obedience to the Father’s will, as Phil 2:8 tells us; obedience even to death on a cross!

Near the Cross

Jesus, keep me near the cross - there a precious fountain
Free to all - a healing stream - flows from Calvary's mountain

(refrain) In the cross - in the cross - be my glory ever

'Till my raptured soul shall find - rest beyond the river

Near the cross - a trembling soul - love and mercy found me
There the bright and morning star - sheds its beams around me

Near the cross - O Lamb of God - bring its scenes before me
Help me walk from day to day - with its shadows o'er me

Near the cross - I'll watch and wait - hoping, trusting ever
'Til I reach the golden strand - just beyond the river

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And so, today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all - having laid down the life which is temporary, in order to attain to the risen life which is eternal. In 1Ti 6:19, Paul calls this the life that is *truly* life. Each of us who has identified with Christ in dying to sin - who is unashamed to be numbered with Him - has what the author of Hebrews in chapter 6 calls an anchor of hope in Him. Jesus has entered into the eternal sanctuary on our behalf, opening the way for us to follow. Meanwhile, we are securely and eternally tethered to Him there.

So, let us celebrate *His* resurrection as we sing words which joyfully anticipate our *own* resurrection. And then, let us spur one another on to lives which exude gratefulness for the perfect plan of the Father, obediently completed by Jesus the Christ, by the saving power of the Holy Spirit Who dwells in each of us who has been saved by grace through faith. Amen!

When We All Get to Heaven

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus - Sing His mercy and His grace
In the mansions - bright and blessed - He'll prepare for us a place

(refrain) When we all get to heaven - what a day of rejoicing that will be

When we all see Jesus - we'll sing and shout the victory

While we walk the pilgrim pathway - clouds will overspread the sky
But when trav'ling days are over - not a shadow - not a sigh

Let us then be true and faithful - trusting, serving - every day
Just one glimpse of Him in glory - will the toils of life repay

Onward to the prize before us - soon His beauty we'll behold
Soon the pearly gates will open - we shall tread the streets of gold

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