

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* on this glorious Easter morning, when we remember together the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. No doubt, we Christians often recall the events of that first Good Friday, when the Lord gave His life on the cross at Calvary. Not that the great fact of the empty tomb can be far from our minds and affections throughout the year, yet it is good to mark the time with a holiday as we do, and have done, in this country, for many years.

I shall base many of my remarks this morning around some well known hymns that repeat the Easter story in a simple way, and which help us to grasp its profound implications. The first of these is a hymn that I learned when I was at school, in the years immediately after the Second World War. It was composed by Mrs. C.F. Alexander, who lived in Ireland during the middle years of the nineteenth century, and who wrote many hymns for children including "*All Things Bright and Beautiful*". Her hymn for us, as we begin today, is the well loved, "*There is a Green Hill Far Away*". I quote now the first two verses:

*"There is a green hill far away,
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all.*

*We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains He had to bear;
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there."*

The first thing to notice is that Mrs. Alexander claims, in the opening three lines of her hymn, that she is writing about an event rooted in history. Very few scholars would doubt that the crucifixion ever took place, so that we are dealing today with an incident that actually happened in a world dominated by Roman rule.

When we arrive at the last line of the first verse, a new avenue of thought opens up, for now we are asked to believe that the death of the Lord can have implications for us this morning. We have to ascertain what the hymn writer meant when she included the statement, "[He] died to save us all." Regular listeners to Premier Christian Radio will know that, through God's mercy, the death of the Lord Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for sin. Such a statement could be criticised by saying that it begs the question of why there needs to be a sacrifice for sin. They ask whether mankind is in such a plight that it needed saving in the first place? The Bible tells us that: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24).

If we add the statement by the Apostle Paul, in Romans 1:18, we learn that God's wrath is revealed against all unrighteousness. There we have it succinctly stated in biblical language. In simple terms, sinful man has to do with a holy and righteous God. With the level of cruelty, violence, corruption and selfishness that affects our world, it would be a foolish person who claimed that there was nothing wrong with society today. It would also be a foolish person who claimed that religion was absolved of any part in the intolerance, and even violence, in today's society.

Now we have arrived at this point I will quote the third verse of our hymn:

*"He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by His precious blood."*

What Mrs. Alexander claims in this verse, when she writes: "He died to make us good", is that true Christianity effects an essential change in the moral make up of a person who truly believes in Jesus, as we are then blessed with the new life, the life of Christ. We are committed to Him who invited His followers to take His yoke upon them and learn from Him

(Matthew 11:29). We must beware of thinking that the death and resurrection of the Lord has implications only for the future by making us fit for heaven. If we understand the truth of Easter correctly, then we are different persons **now**.

If we read the last verse of the hymn, we see that this truth is emphasised:

*“Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved!
And we must love Him too,
And trust in His redeeming blood
And try His works to do.”*

Christians live on a different basis because we are only made acceptable to God in the merit of His Son and the sufferings He endured as the perfect sacrifice for sin. His death was not an award from an angry God that needed His pound of flesh, but a demonstration of eternal love, as the Apostle John recalls in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” I should have stated earlier that all biblical quotations are from the Authorised or King James Version.

There remains the fourth verse of our hymn for us to focus our attention on for a couple of minutes:

*“There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.”*

When I first learned this hymn as a young child, I used to think that the word “only” in the third line was the “only” that limited a person’s actions. For instance we used to say of another lad, in our class at school, that he could only repeat his two and three times table, whereas others could remember the six and seven times tables. Mistakenly, I thought that the only thing that Jesus could do was open the gate of heaven. He was incapable of anything else, or so I thought. I learned later that the “only” of Mrs. Alexander’s hymn meant that Jesus was unique in that He, and only He, was sent of God to bring salvation into the reach of all. John in 1 John 4:14 states: “And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.” The New Testament writers frequently emphasise that the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus is because He is the Son of God, another cardinal element of the believer’s confession.

Though we have exhausted most of the references to the death of the Lord in our hymn, we have not exhausted the significance of the cross. A children’s hymn could never encapsulate all of the biblical descriptions and implications of Calvary. Even though the words of Mrs. Alexander are a good introduction to our Easter talk, we need to enlarge our understanding by looking further into the Scriptures.

“Propitiation” is a word that the Apostle Paul uses to increase the understanding of the early Christians, so we, too, need to grasp this truth. Alongside of this are, the wrath of God against sin, His holiness and righteousness, all terms used throughout the Bible, yet linked together by the Apostle, in Romans 3:24-25: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God”.

It is easy to endow such a passage with ideas of an angry God who needs to be appeased. John Stott in his book, *“The Cross of Christ”* (ISBN: 9781844741557), states: “Crude concepts of anger, sacrifice and propitiation are indeed to be rejected. They do not belong to the religion of the Old Testament, let alone the New. This does not mean, however, that there is no biblical concept of these things at all. What is revealed to us in Scripture is a pure doctrine of God’s holy wrath, his loving self-sacrifice in Christ and His initiative to avert His own anger.” Thus it is obvious, that wrath and propitiation (the placating of wrath) belong together on the pages of the New Testament. The death of the Lord was the final demonstration that mercy and truth are met together and righteousness and peace have kissed each other (see Psalm 85:10), as Romans 3:24-25 makes plain.

There is a prophetic passage, in Isaiah 53:5, that further enlightens our understanding of the death of our Lord: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

Here we get the thought of “substitution”, a word never actually mentioned in Scripture, yet as we have seen from Isaiah, a concept that is, without a shadow of a doubt, rooted in Scripture. Four times in our quoted passage a comparison is made between “us” and “him”. Lest any listener imagines that I am using Old Testament Scriptures to propose a doctrine that the New Testament does not support, I will read Romans 4:25 “[Jesus our Lord] was delivered for our offences, and was again raised for our justification.” Notice again that our blessings stem from His taking our place. I will further support this point by referring to 1 Peter 2:24: “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.”

I trust that you noticed that Peter quoted some words from Isaiah 53:9 that we have already read this morning. Essentially, substitution means that a person is put in the place of another, meaning that the sins and transgressions were ours, the wounds and sufferings for them were endured by the Lord Jesus.

Some years ago, when I was looking through some of the odds and ends that my parents had kept over the years of their marriage, I came across an insurance policy given to them as readers of a magazine called "John Bull". Apparently, as they had taken out a subscription for that journal, sometime around 1935, they qualified for some form of house and contents insurance. Though I doubt if they ever claimed on this policy it did promise a certain amount of cash to all who needed such help, despite the fact that they had not paid the premium. The directors of the magazine had paid the price of the policy only for others to benefit. My point, in recounting this poor illustration of the biblical concept of substitution, is to ask each one of us, this Easter morning, if we have availed ourselves of the offer of God's salvation; are we believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? Have our sins have been forgiven through the amazing grace of God?

One of Wesley's great hymns includes the verse:

*"He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood avails for me."*

(Charles Wesley 1707-1788)

This is the point of preaching the Gospel or good news of Jesus. We have a message of the great events of Easter; of the death and resurrection of Him who is and always was the Son of the Highest. Does this message affect us in any way? Have we been brought to bow the knee to Him, to confess him as Lord? Can we, like Wesley, avail ourselves, through grace, of the sacrifice that makes the "foulest clean". I pray that we are rejoicing this morning in the deep and rich forgiveness of God.

We must now finish this section of our Easter talk, but before we do so I wish to quote from a hymn by Isaac Watts, the prince of hymn writers:

*"See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down:
Did ere such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?"*

We, who love the Lord Jesus, can never be unmindful of the depth of suffering that our redemption caused Him. Such love demands our life, our soul, our all.

As we begin now to discuss briefly the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, can I remind you, on this Easter Sunday, that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where we are concentrating upon the events of that first Easter, so many years ago, when the Lord Jesus was crucified at Calvary. As just stated, we move now to consider the great and glorious doctrine of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, by referring to Luke 24:2-5, where the context is a visit to the garden tomb by some women. We now read: "And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: and as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead?"

One can imagine the joy and gladness that filled these ladies when it dawned upon them that the One they loved and served was alive again and risen from that tomb. Each of the other three Gospels recounts a similar story of the empty grave. It is important for us to realise that the biblical emphasis is upon the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. His body was not left to moulder in the ground. His was a complete victory over every element of Satan's power. The Apostles, in their letters, make clear that as He was raised from the grave then so one day shall we. Though there are other implications of the resurrection of the Lord, it is with Luke's words, in Luke 24:2-5, that I wish to emphasise this Easter morning, that our hearts might be lifted by the knowledge that He, who suffered for our sins, is alive for evermore.

Now, as we approach the end of our time together, I want to examine how the Apostle Paul views the resurrection, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."

Notice again the facts of history and the facts of faith. His death and burial are beyond dispute as facts of history. That He died for our sins is a matter of belief, brought into our possession by the Holy Spirit, as is belief in His resurrection. That is not to say that His resurrection did not have witnesses, for the New Testament names many persons who met the risen

Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 tells of six different occasions when the Lord was seen after His burial, including once by a crowd of five hundred, and this passage does not include the visit to the tomb that we have already discussed.

From 1 Corinthians 15:14-19 we learn that if Christ is not raised then the whole Christian message is baseless and there is no possibility of our sins being forgiven. This would mean that all who died trusting in the Lord would perish, rather than being in His presence in a state of eternal blessedness. A commentator on Scripture has written regarding this point: "Truly the resurrection of Christ is the keystone of the arch. Dislodge that, and every stone of the arch falls out. But equally we may liken it to the foundation stone upon which the temple of truth stands" (Hole, FB, *Foundations of the Faith*, page 87). It is that foundation and truth that I wish to turn to for our closing minutes.

The resurrection of the Lord is altogether different from those persons who were raised from the dead by the Lord in the Gospels. Each one of those was restored again to the same condition of life that they had previously enjoyed. If we read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 we will see how Christian resurrection is different: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness: it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

There we have it from the pen of Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles. We, who trust in the Lord, have the living hope of being like Him. Philippians 3:21 states that the Lord Jesus will change our earthly bodies into those that are fashioned like unto Him, as He is in glory. Our rational minds find difficulty in accepting such statements, objecting that people have been so destroyed, in the many wars that have besmirched our world, that their remains could never be found. Paul's answer is in the same Philippian passage for it is "according to the working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself." When God's mighty power is involved all things are possible.

Our bodies now are mortal and, according to the Bible, are in the image of Adam, the earthy man, meaning we have all the weakness and frailty that accompanies the journey through life of all human beings. Regardless of our ethnicity, our intellect, our gender or social standing, we are all limited by space and time; we shall all end in the corruption of the coffin or the cremating flames. According to one of the passages we have read, how different is the death of a Christian who is promised a spiritual body marked by incorruption, glory and power.

How great the hope we Christians have, for I trust that many listening this morning share the great truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus out from among the dead. Just recently I was walking, with my sister, in the cemetery of the town where I live. We visited the graves of her husband and our parents. As we did so, my mind returned to the day we buried the mortal remains of my father. As his coffin was lowered into the grave his twin brother was broken hearted for they had been very close. My uncle's grief at the loss of his brother was great, so great in fact that it was pitiful to see his tears. I recount this because none can gainsay the sorrow that death can bring as earthly ties are broken. For the Christian, however, the empty grave of the Lord must bring a sense of comfort, as we know that absent from the body means present with the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:8). I was sad that day, probably a deeper sadness than that experienced by my uncle, yet my sadness was tinged by the sure knowledge that my father, as a believer in the Lord Jesus, was at home with Him.

Do we all, in the presence of death, have the sure and certain hope of life in Christ; of being where He is? If some enquire about the whereabouts of the Lord, all we can do is to utter the words of the New Testament, in Ephesians 1:19-20: "And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion..." Paul goes on describing the Lord's ascension to the Father's right hand. That is where He is now.

As time has gone, I would like to conclude this morning with the chorus of an Easter hymn:

*"Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes,
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever with His saints to reign:
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!"*

(Robert Lowry 1826-1899)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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