

God and Man - Easter 2013

- Today is Easter, when we remember and celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ
 - As I was sitting in my office yesterday preparing my Easter sermon, I had an interesting experience that changed the topic for my teaching this morning
 - Saturday mornings is usually the time I set aside to prepare for Sundays, the early quiet part of the day
 - While I was sitting in my office, two women walked to my door
 - They wore dresses, like they were going to church
 - They carried books
 - They were Jehovah's Witnesses seeking a conversation about Christ
 - I greeted them and smiled and settled in for an interesting conversation
 - I always work to keep religious visitors engaged
 - Can you think of any other time when an unbeliever comes to you asking to have a conversation about Christ?
 - If you can't take advantage of that opportunity, when will you ever present the Gospel to someone?
 - The two women said the occasion for their visit was Easter
 - And they offered me a pamphlet with information on the resurrection of Jesus
- In case you don't know much about the teachings of the JWs, let me summarize them for you
 - They don't believe Jesus was God, but merely a messenger of the Father
 - In fact they don't believe in the Trinity at all
 - To JWs, there is only Jehovah, as they call the Father

- Also, like the Catholic church, they teach that works are required along with “faith” to be saved
- They also teach that the kind of resurrection a person may experience will differ depending on how good the person was in life
 - Works and good living are essential for a proper resurrection and heavenly reward they say
 - For example, they distort and deny the Bible’s teaching that the thief on the cross who confessed Christ went to Heaven with Jesus
 - Rather, they say the thief couldn’t have been with Jesus since the thief had too much sin in his life to merit resurrection into heaven

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- They say the thief was promised a lesser resurrection in a future earthly kingdom
 - The Bible records that Jesus said the thief would be in that paradise “today,” not in some future kingdom that has yet to appear
 - In summary, the JW’s teaching mixes a theology of works with a distorted view of the Bible’s teaching on resurrection and the kingdom
- The JW’s claim to follow the Bible, but since they are not Christians, they lack the indwelling of the Holy Spirit
 - And without the Holy Spirit, they cannot understand spiritual truths found in scripture
 - They are like Pharisees, in that the way they claim to know what the Bible says
 - Yet they take man-made ideas and project them onto the text of scripture
 - As Paul says in Galatians, they have believed a false gospel, which is no gospel at all

- So in light of their wrong view of Jesus and resurrection, I asked them about the meaning of Easter and Jesus' death and resurrection
 - After all, if Jesus is not God in the flesh as they say, then why was His death and resurrection notable and meaningful?
 - After all, other men have been brought back to life in the Bible
 - Elijah raised a widow's son from death in 1Kings 17
 - Jesus raised another widow's son in Luke 7
 - And even Paul raised a man from death after he fell from a window in Acts 20
 - So if Jesus were simply another man sent by God, why should we celebrate His death and resurrection on this day every year?
 - Secondly, if Jesus' death and resurrection didn't assure His followers of Heaven, what was the benefit of His dying?
 - If the thief on the cross didn't share in the inheritance Christ despite Jesus' own words, then what assurance can I have that I will merit heaven?
 - How is the story of Easter good news for any of us if it doesn't address our sin and our desire to avoid God's wrath?
- When we boil it all down, my conversation with these women centered on the true meaning of Easter

Three Texas college students were on Spring Break and unfortunately, they died in a car accident and found themselves standing at the pearly gates of heaven.

As all good heaven stories go, Peter meets the three to test them to see if they may enter into Heaven. He asks each man one simple question. First, St. Peter asks the University of Texas graduate, "What is Easter?" The UT grad replies, "Oh, that's easy! It's the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and are thankful..."

"Wrong!," replies St. Peter, and he then proceeds to ask the Texas Aggie grad the same question, "What is Easter?"

The Aggie replies, "Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus." St. Peter looks at the Aggie and just shakes his head in disgust, tells him he's wrong, and then peers over his glasses at the third student.

Now the third student was from Baylor University, a proper Texas Christian college. So Peter asks, "Can you tell me what is Easter?"

The Baylor grad smiles confidently and looks St. Peter in the eyes, "I know what Easter is. Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and Jesus was later betrayed and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took him to be crucified and he was stabbed in the side, made to wear a crown of thorns, and was hung on a cross with nails through his hands. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder."

St. Peter smiles broadly with delight. Finally, someone who knew what Easter was about.

But the Baylor graduate wasn't finished. He continued, "Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out...and if Jesus sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter."

- So when it comes to Easter, it's not enough that we get some or even most of the story right...we need to understand everything
 - What about the two questions I raised with my JW visitors?
 - Why is Jesus' death and resurrection so important in scripture?
 - And what does the fact of His resurrection mean for us today?
 - The answers to these questions are the keys to orthodox Christianity
 - These are the reasons Easter matters
 - It's why we say Easter is not about the bunny
- So why was Jesus' death and resurrection so important
 - As I asked this question of the older lady, I remember she looked at me with a puzzled, almost pained look and asked:
 - You don't really think God died, do you? You don't think God would go to Hell?

- She couldn't bring herself to accept that God could ever suffer death, death on a cross, much less experience the penalty of sin, which is separation from God
 - I must admit the idea is striking, even incomprehensible
 - Why would the Creator ever accept such a thing, much less do so for the sake of sinners?
- The JW's have tried to reconcile that difficulty by simply demoting Jesus to someone less than God
 - He was simply a messenger, a prophet, a man chosen to represent God
 - In fact, their literature draws a comparison between Adam, who Luke calls the "son of God" in his genealogy, with Jesus, Who is called the only begotten Son of God
 - They use this comparison to support the claim that both Adam and Jesus are created men
 - Jesus was just created in a "better form" than Adam, they teach
 - This is a good example of speculation supported with an improper use of scripture
 - Throughout history, this process has lead many away from the truth and into a false gospel
- So did God really come in the form of a man, Jesus?
 - First, the Bible teaches that Jesus was not created like Adam, but was always in existence, even from the beginning of creation

[John 1:1](#) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[John 1:2](#) He was in the beginning with God.

[John 1:3](#) All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

- John says Jesus, who John calls the Word, was God
- Moreover, Jesus was the creator of all things, John says
 - Jesus couldn't have been a man like Adam created by God, since everything in the Universe was created by Him

- John says all things came into being through Him
 - Then Paul tells us what happened next

[Phil. 2:5](#) Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,
[Phil. 2:6](#) who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

[Phil. 2:7](#) but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

[Phil. 2:8](#) Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- But Paul says that though Jesus was equal with the Father as God, nevertheless He was willing to step down from His position in Heaven to take the form of a man
- Jesus came in the likeness of man
 - The Greek word for likeness is homoion, which means in the form or appearance
 - Jesus was man but not the same as Adam or you or me
 - He was the God-man, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin
- So Jesus was not born like you and me with original sin...He was born perfect and sinless
- After living a perfect, sinless life, Paul says Jesus put Himself on a cross and suffered death voluntarily though Jesus had no sin of His own requiring death
 - So if Jesus was merely a superhuman created by the Father, as the JW's say, than Paul and John were either liars or fools
 - And if they were wrong about Jesus' identity, then why would we possibly accept anything else they wrote?
 - The Bible teaches us that Jesus was God in the form of man
- So Easter is the story of God taking the form of man so He could suffer death and enter Hell
 - But my JW visitor couldn't understand why God would ever do such a thing

- I think the difficulty for that woman was that she saw no reason why a perfect, all-powerful God would need to die in that way
- Why would God need to die...that is always the sticking point in explaining the Gospel
 - Everyone can understand why Jesus would come to earth and teach
 - Even the most hardened unbeliever will often concede that Jesus taught useful moral principles
 - They can see value in His wisdom and His example of good living
 - The problem comes when the conversation turns to a discussion of Jesus' death, and the meaning of the event
- Paul says the cross is foolishness to the world that's perishing and a stumbling block to the Jews
- Because virtually everyone can accept the way Jesus' story began, but it's the ending...the ending of His story is always the sticking point
- Why did God need to come as a man only to die on a cross? What is the meaning of the cross? Why do we celebrate that moment every Easter?
 - Once again, scripture gives us the answer

[1Pet. 3:18](#) For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;
[1Pet. 3:19](#) in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,

[2Cor. 5:21](#) He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

[Gal. 3:13](#) Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE” –

- Peter says that Christ died for our sins
 - Jesus was making a payment that the Father required for sin
 - Sin requires a payment of death, according to God's own word in the Garden spoken to Adam

- And since all men have sinned, all men owe God this payment
 - The death that God requires is one of both body and spirit
 - We all experience the first death, that of our body
 - The important question is whether we also suffer the second death, the one of the spirit, the one that results in eternal torment
 - The Bible says not everyone will have to experience that second death
- The Bible teaches that Jesus took the penalty of death on our behalf when He died on that cross
 - Jesus died the physical death the curse of God required
 - Then He went into the depths of the Earth proclaiming the truth to those in prison now, Peter tells us
 - Jesus took our place in all respects when He died for our sins
 - As Paul says, Jesus received the curse that we deserve when He hung on that cross
- And Jesus was qualified to make that payment for us because Jesus was sinless Himself
 - Had Jesus not been sinless, His death would have merely paid the penalty for His own sin
 - But since He was sinless, He could allow His death to substitute for us
 - Peter says it was a case of the Just taking the place of the unjust
 - And Paul repeats this truth in 2Cor saying that the Father made Jesus to be sin in our place, though Jesus had no sin of His own
 - But since sinless Jesus = paid the price for sin, His sinless life could be credited to someone else
 - It's like someone taking the test for me

- We could say that in the test of life, we scored a 0 on the final exam...because of our sin, we fail the test of perfection that God require
- Meanwhile, Jesus took the same test, living as a man...but He scored a perfect 100
 - He never sinned...not even once the Bible says
- Therefore on the day of our judgment, when God collects our tests, and grades them, we'll find that Jesus has switched His answer sheet with ours
 - We'll receive His perfect score and we'll be welcomed into Heaven not because of our own merit but on the basis of His perfect life
 - Meanwhile, Jesus has already taken our failing grades, paying the price for our when He hung on the cross in our place
- Peter says Jesus died once for all
 - His death was unique because after He rose, He never died again
 - The Bible says after Jesus was resurrected, He ascended into Heaven to be our representative before the Father
 - In every other example of resurrection we have in scripture, the person brought back to life still had to die again
 - Because eventually, they faced judgment
 - But Jesus never died again
 - He resurrected into His eternal form
 - And Jesus promises that those who accept His payment on the cross will share in his resurrection and life in the Kingdom
 - The ladies who visited my door couldn't explain the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection
 - The other men in the Bible we were reported to be resurrected, either by Jesus or a prophet or an apostle, all came back in the same corruptible body

- So they all had to die again...they hadn't been resurrected into an eternal life...they just came back into the same life they had before
 - This was a temporary return
- They were brought back to life to make a point
 - And that point was that God alone has the power over death
 - Yet they still suffered death in the end, because they were not God themselves
- But Jesus's resurrection was altogether different
 - He returned to life and never again saw death
 - And in that fact, Jesus proved He had the power to put an end to death forever
 - The One who can put an end to death is the One I want to follow
 - He has proven He is God, for only God has this power
 - That's why Paul says in Romans 10

[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;

- Jesus is Lord...Jesus died...Jesus was raised from the dead
- This is the true Gospel
- Sadly, this is the truth that alluded my visitors
- The JW's were right about one thing
 - The thief on the cross wasn't good enough to enter Heaven on that day he died
 - His life was nothing but a legacy of sin
 - And even one sin is enough to keep someone forever in the judgment fires of Hell
 - So how could Jesus promise paradise to such a sinful man?

- Because even as Jesus spoke those words, He was paying for that thief's sins
- The thief was promised entry into Heaven not because he had earned his way there, for it's impossible to earn your way out of past sin
 - No matter how many "right" answers you give on a test, they don't erase the wrong answers
 - And in the class of life, God doesn't grade on the curve...only those with 100% perfection may enter His presence
- The thief receive Jesus' promise on the basis of faith alone, not works
- So what answer do we offer that lady or anyone who couldn't see a reason for God to allow Himself to die on a cross?
 - Once again, we give them the answer the Bible gives

[Rom. 5:6](#) For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

[Rom. 5:7](#) For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.

[Rom. 5:8](#) But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

[Rom. 5:9](#) Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

- In a word...love
- The love of God is demonstrated by the fact that He would take our sins upon Himself and die in our place
 - Because there was no other option, because we failed the test
 - So Jesus took the penalty in our place
- That's the meaning of Easter
 - It's not a celebration of Jesus' death or even of His resurrection
 - Ultimately, it's a celebration that our debt has been paid
 - It's the moment our account with God was settled
 - It's the moment that God took my place