

JESUS THE CHRIST

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we left our heroes, the apostles, in the temple courts of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Peter was explaining the apparent drunkenness of the believers to the crowd that gathered when they heard the siren sound of the mighty rushing wind that came when the Holy Spirit fell upon these individuals. He explained the strange excitement of these 120 people, and also their strange utterances, their speaking the praise of God in many languages, even though they were apparently peasants from the province of Galilee. He said this was what the prophet Joel had predicted would happen: that God would begin a new age, what we now call "the age of the Spirit," and that it would begin and be characterized by a proclamation of the truth by all kinds of people and all classes of society -- men and women, young and old, servants and masters, Jews and Gentiles -- all kinds of flesh. The Spirit of God would come upon them and they would be able to speak the truth about Jesus Christ. The age, Joel said, would begin by proclamation, but it would end with tribulation. At the end there would be the strange darkening of the sun and moon, and signs in the heavens and on the earth.

We are 2,000 years away from the beginning of that age, and we are 2,000 years closer to the end. It may well be, as we look around us at the tremendous problems we are facing in society, that the end has begun. It is striking that 25 years ago many people would not have believed that the book of Revelation could be literally fulfilled. But today no one questions that. It can be literally fulfilled, exactly as written. We see the very processes by which it can be done. But the Apostle Peter said that, throughout this whole age, the great and good news would be that whoever would call upon the name of the Lord would be saved. By "salvation" he meant that they would be able to be free from everything that keeps them from being the kind of men and women they were intended to be. This is what salvation is. It is a restoration to what God intended when he made man in the first place. The way you will be saved, Peter says, is to call upon the name of the Lord.

Having said that, he is now ready to drop a bomb upon these people. For, "That Lord upon which men must call," he announces, "is none other than the prophet who was crucified 50 days ago here in the city of Jerusalem -- Jesus of Nazareth." That striking announcement fell upon the ears of these people with fantastic power. For it came as Peter set before them a three-fold argument which began with the humanity of Jesus and ended with a clear proclamation of his deity. And, in that three-fold argument, Peter moved with such precision and such irrefutable proofs that, when he arrived at his conclusion, some 3,000 people arrived with him. We are going to look at that most impressive and convincing message now.

The first movement of it is the foundation of facts which Peter laid, Verses 22-24:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty words and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know -- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."
{Acts 2:22-24 RSV}

In that introduction are the great events in history upon which our Christian faith rests: The life, and the death, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You notice that these are ordinary history. They are not unusual, not a kind of super history, not a holy history; they are normal events such as would have been recorded in any daily newspaper which had been published then. If these events had not occurred, Christianity would be a hoax, a bad joke, a fake. It is upon the historicity of these events that our faith must rest. They actually occurred.

Now, if they had not occurred, who would know better than these people to whom Peter is addressing himself? These people had been there all through the time of the occurrence of these events. They had been there during the Passover week, when the city was so stirred with the arrest and trial and the death of Jesus. And they of all people would have been prepared to contradict the apostle if any of these events were legend or myth, as some scholars today try to tell us they were. But here the apostle simply sets these forth as conclusive evidence of which they themselves are the witnesses, and thus he begins to drive home to their hearts the indisputable proofs which lie behind the claims of Christian faith.

Each of the events he mentions here is designed to teach mankind a very important truth:

First, there is the life and ministry of Jesus, the pattern of normal humanity which he set before us: "Jesus of Nazareth," he says, "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know..." He calls them to witness that these events are true. He was a man, says Peter. He was a human being like anyone else. He was not a specter, not a phantom, not a superman. He was a man, a normal man. And he was authenticated by God, approved of God as a standard of humanity. In other words, when you see Jesus, you see what God intended man to be. And that is what Peter claims here before these people. They were observing a man authenticated by God.

The method of authentication was by "mighty works and wonders and signs" -- the miracles of Jesus. These amazing miracles of changing water to wine, and stilling the winds and the waves, multiplying the loaves and fishes, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead -- what are these? Well, for the most part, they are manifestations of the control of nature intended for man. They are what man was intended to do in relationship to the world of nature around. These signs were not done by Jesus because he was God. Peter makes this clear. He says that it was God who did them through him. They were done by a man who was yielded to the indwelling power and life of a God who was within. And by means of that power he did these great miracles. That is the normal pattern of humanity. It is the means by which the life of God the Father was made available to the man, Jesus.

Now, Jesus was God -- no question about it -- and Peter will declare it before this message is through. But that is not the secret of his ministry. The secret of his ministry was that he was a man through whom God worked, and that is where Peter begins his great message.

Jesus was the pattern of normal humanity. Any time you see the life of Jesus in the Gospels, that is what God wants to get across. We are to be living like this man. We are to be acting and thinking and reacting as he did, for he is the pattern of normal humanity.

The second event Peter focuses on is the death of Jesus. In that death, he says, is revealed the purpose of God in history: "...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The death of Jesus was accomplished, he says, by you people, you Jews. And you did it through the hands of the Gentiles, the lawless Romans -- lawless in regard to the observance of God's law. You did this, he says, but nevertheless it was fulfilling the determined program and plan of God. God planned the cross. The cross was no accident in the life of Jesus; it was programmed by God the Father from the beginning of time. It was an essential event, says this apostle. By that he indicates that the only way God could deal with the problem of human evil, the basic problem with which we all wrestle, was by the death of Jesus. It had to be, and God arranged it. Because there is no way to deal with this evil within us except by death.

I heard a man the other day referred to as a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." This was a reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's novel about a man who by day was the respectable, honored Dr. Jekyll, but by night turned into a monstrous criminal -- Mr. Hyde. This is frequently said about individuals who are schizophrenic in character. I have no objection to using that title for anybody -- as long as you apply it to everybody, because we are all Dr. Jekylls and Mr. Hydes. We all are capable of putting on a respectable front. You've got yours on right now! You always put it on when you come to church. But we also know that within us lurks an evil, malevolent nature which responds with malice, and viciousness, and hardness, and callousness, and lovelessness. We are all capable of this. And even at moments when we want to do good we find this evil nature coming out. This is what God is aiming at destroying.

Last week a young man came to see me. He was raised as a boy in our Sunday school. I had not seen him for a number of years. He told me about his life, how he had gotten into difficulties, spent a few years in prison. He had come back to the area and was really sorry for some of the things he had done. He told me he realized that he was miserable, and had made a fool of himself, and he wanted to straighten out and do right. He came by on his own to tell me about it. We talked about his life and what it took to correct it, and the need for a restoration to the love and fellowship of the Lord Jesus. We prayed together. That very night that boy went down to the place where he worked and cleaned out the till. Then he stole \$200 from his father, and took off.

You see, the possibilities of evil are in us all. And God says that the only way it can be broken is by the death of Jesus, and the meaning of that death. There is no other way out. Nothing else will work. And if we do not try to grapple with the evil in us on those terms, there is no other choice left but despair and absurdity, which is why we see so much of that around us.

When you read this account about "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," do not read it as though it means that these men and women who were involved in the death of Jesus were robots, automatons who could not help themselves, who had no choice, but had to put Jesus to death and therefore could hardly be blamed. It never means that. What was determined was that, once having made a choice to reject God, they no longer had a choice as to how this would be manifested. It must manifest itself in some deliberate action and attitude against Jesus Christ. And that is what happened. When we reject God, it comes out in a manifestation like this -- against Jesus Christ. Somehow or other it ends up by hating and destroying, if possible, the work and the person of Jesus Christ. Once the choice is made to turn away from God, then there is no longer a choice; it has to come out in this way. That is what Peter declared to these people.

The third event was the resurrection: "But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Here is revealed the power of God among men -- the resurrection power of God, a power which man cannot duplicate. And that is what makes men so angry. He is baffled by this power of God. Resurrection power is the ability to bring life out of death, to correct a situation which is hopeless, to change a person who is irremediable -- that is resurrection power.

I had lunch this week with a high school boy who told me about his conversion, and the reaction of his father. His father was baffled by this conversion. He could not understand it, could not explain it. It fit no psychological pattern he knew of. He could not explain why his son was so suddenly and drastically different. And because he could not explain it, it angered him, and he reacted against it, and was fighting it all the way. This is the frequent reaction of those who come into contact, somehow, with the resurrection power of God, this power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

You see, man is always dreaming of finding ways to beat death, if we can. There are the most ghastly things being proposed these days. It is being suggested, for instance, that if you feel yourself about to die, you go down and get yourself deep-frozen, and your body put away in a storage vault and kept there for 50 to 100 years. Then, when science has supposedly solved the problem, found a cure for the disease you are dying of, they will thaw you out, and you will get a chance to go on living then. What a miserable farce! What a far cry from resurrection! This is not what happened to Jesus Christ when he rose from the dead in all the fullness and vitality of his person.

Peter says, "We disciples are the witnesses of these things. We saw him." And the remarkable thing is that not one voice is lifted in protest in this whole crowd of people. To me, one of the greatest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus is right here -- that this man could stand up in the city where these events had taken place, a little more than a month earlier, and tell these people that Jesus had risen from the dead, and not one voice challenges him! They had not seen him -- he appeared only to his disciples -- but they had known that the body was not there. They could go out to the tomb and see that it was empty. They knew that the authorities could not produce the body of Jesus, though they would have given a king's ransom to have done so. They had heard all the wild rumors that spread through the city that Jesus was alive and that he was appearing to his own disciples from time to time. And there is not one voice who challenges what the apostle says. Instead they stand there in mute and stricken silence as the apostle drives home with powerful blows the sword of the Spirit, convicting them of the truth of his claim.

The second movement of Peter's address is the revelation of the background of prediction. Here are these manifested events, which they could not deny, set before this crowd. But there is also a pattern of prediction to which they are linked which tremendously enhances the power of the apostle's argument. He quotes now from David:

**"For David says concerning him,
I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will dwell in hope.
For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades,
nor let thy Holy One see corruption.
Thou hast made known to me the ways of life;
thou wilt make me full of gladness with thy presence."** {Acts 2:25-28 RSV}

The point Peter is making here by this quotation from the sixteenth Psalm is not merely that David had predicted that Jesus would rise from the dead, it is also that David had declared that the resurrection was absolutely necessary in view of the life Jesus had lived. David foresaw Jesus saying, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be moved." That is a life lived in continual dependence upon the power and authority of the Father. Therefore -- "therefore I will be at rest when I face death," is his argument. "Therefore," because I have trusted and rested upon

God, "my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will rest in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, and you will not let my body rot in the grave." But instead, "you will make known to me the ways of life, and your presence will be fullness of gladness and joy." That is the prediction of David. And it simply indicates that the kind of life Jesus lived guaranteed that death would have no power over him.

In the words of our friend, Major Ian Thomas,

He had to be what he was in order to do what he did.

And then Major Thomas completes it:

He had to do what he did in order that we might have what he is.
And we must have what he is in order to be what he was.

Now, that is Christianity!

Men and women, ordinary people like you and me, with all our hang-ups, all our frustrations, nevertheless finding a whole new basis for life -- because we have what he is. And because we have what he is, we can be what he was. That is Christianity, and nothing less will be accepted.

The second point that Peter makes is that David was not talking about himself:

"Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses." {Acts 2:29-32 RSV}

One of the clever arguments of skeptics about the resurrection is to say that these predictive psalms, such as Psalm 16 and Psalm 22 and others that point forward to Christ, are really not predictions at all, that they only reflect some personal experience that the Psalmist was going through, and that it is quite wrong to read them as pointing forward to Jesus Christ. But you see how Peter refutes that argument. He says, "You can't say that about the sixteenth Psalm, because it is talking about a man who is not abandoned to Hades, and whose body does not rot in the grave. That couldn't be David, because David died and was buried, and he remains dead. If you don't believe it, there's his tomb" And the tomb of David is still pointed out in the city of Jerusalem today. Peter says that is the proof that it is not David who is reflected here; it is Another. And that Other is the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

His third point in this movement is that death had no effect whatsoever upon Jesus Christ. His soul did not go into Hades, and his body did not rot in the tomb. Death had no power over him at all. Now, there is a strange theory which has been held by many Christians for a long time. It is that when Jesus died, his soul went to hell -- his body went into the grave, but his soul went to hell -- and that there he preached to the spirits that were in Hades and led some of them captive up into heaven. I do not understand how that theory became so widely accepted, because there is no support for it in the Scriptures at all. There are certain passages which, read rather superficially, seem to suggest something like this. But examined fully they provide no support for this at all. Jesus did not go to Hades. When he died, his last words were: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And his body was put into the grave, but it saw no corruption. The argument of the apostle is that death had no power over him, none at all. It could not touch him -- either as to his soul or as to his body. "And we apostles," Peter says, "are witness of the fact that God raised him on the third day."

The last movement is in Verses 33-37. Here we have the demonstration of the results:

**"Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens; but he himself says,
'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand,
till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet.'
Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."**

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" {Acts 2:33-37 RSV}

Once again the apostle turns the whole crowd into witnesses of what he claimed. He says, "You are seeing right now the proof of what David had predicted would happen." And he quotes from the 110th Psalm the prediction that God would say to David's Lord, "Sit at my right hand till I make you ruler over all -- till I make your enemies your footstool." "And now," Peter says, "you know that has happened: 'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has now poured out this which you see and hear.'"

That meant they were looking right then at the tongues of fire which danced on the heads of these men, and they were hearing the sound of the mighty wind, and the utterance of the strange languages. "These things," Peter says, "are proof that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and Christ."

"Lord" means ruler of all things, king over all men, the One who holds the key to life and death, heaven and hell, in his hands. All power in heaven and in earth is committed unto him. And there is no authority or power that exists which does not take its direction and its limitation from him.

"Christ," of course, means "Messiah." We say the words, "Jesus Christ," and many of us think that Jesus is his first name, and Christ his last. But that is not the case. Jesus is his name; Christ is his title. Christ means Messiah -- the promised One, the Deliverer, the only hope that mankind has ever had.

Suddenly all this made perfect sense to this multitude. The full force of Peter's arguments thudded home, and they realized that they were in a very precarious position. This One whom he had proven, by indisputable evidence, to be Lord, was the One they had crucified 50 days earlier.

Can you imagine how they felt? It would be very much as if you went down to apply for a job, and on the way you got into an automobile accident. And when the other driver got out, you started beating and cursing and kicking him in anger. Then you got into your car and drove off, and went on to apply for the job. When you were all cleaned up and ready, you were ushered into the presence of the man whom you had just beaten and cursed out in the street. That is what these people felt. No wonder they were cut to the heart and cried out, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

There is where Christianity rests its case. Jesus Christ is Lord, whether men know it or not. The very forces which control their lives are dependent upon him. It would be almost laughable, if it were not so sad, to hear people -- old and young alike -- dismiss Jesus Christ as though he were an option, as though they had the choice either of believing or not believing in him, whatever they felt like, and it did not make much difference -- one way or the other.

The declaration of Peter on this day is that he is the Inevitable Man. There is no way you can avoid him. Your very life is dependent upon him. He is Lord over all things. And, sooner or later, you have to deal with Jesus Christ, whether you like it or not.

The appeal of this crowd is, "What shall we do?"

Peter's answer is wonderful -- it is the Christian gospel. We are not going to take it now, but will wait for the next study. But it is a glorious declaration that Christ is not angry at us. He will receive us, if we will deal honestly with him, and recognize the fact that he is Lord, and has the right to Lordship in your life and mine.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the truth in this mighty declaration that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord, that you have exalted him and give him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. We pray that any who have never come to know this One as Lord may now open their life and cry out to him as these men and women did: "What shall we do?" and hear this delivering word to repent and to believe, and thus receive the promised Spirit, who is available to all. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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