

THE FIRST DAY OF A NEW CREATION

By Steve Zeisler

You have been asked no more important question in your life than that asked in the old spiritual: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The song does not ask if he was crucified or if God accepted the sacrifice. It asks "Were you there?" Were your sins nailed on that cross and your old nature put to death? Were you there when he rose up from the grave so that the new life spread abroad among the children of Adam applies to you? Have you trusted Christ for salvation?

Easter is perhaps the most sensible day of the year for busy people like us to ask important questions about our own hearts and our direction in life who have we become and where are we going? Today some people will open Bibles which are left on the shelf the rest of the year. This is the day when the message of hope and confidence about eternity is most likely to be received.

This being the case, I want to issue a special challenge to you today to seriously evaluate your heart as to what you have become and discover what motivates you at the deepest levels. Let this one day in the year (the most important of all holy days) be a time when you see yourself, in the inner man, for who you are.

Like me, you have probably just sifted through a stack of checks in order to determine how much income tax you owe this year. Canceled checks can serve as a mini diary: a record of choices we made and the things we valued over the course of that year. It is a bit disconcerting to me to see what is recorded in this diary. I find home repairs I paid for in the Spring being repeated in the Fall. I discover that vacations and other leisure activities I anticipated eagerly can barely be remembered now. Some of my major choices seem so fleeting in hindsight. There are other expenditures that I made for improving myself—books I bought to read or enterprises I set for myself in order to become a better man over the year. Even though I set myself for self-improvement, I seem very little improved. Evaluations of this sort can tell us about our values, what we considered important enough to have devoted our time, energy and money to. Do you discover real Christianity when you examine yourself honestly? "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Let us consider the Easter message. As a way of tying our study together, I would like to read the reflections of G.K. Chesterton written some 60 years ago about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Thinking about his commentary will lead us through the considerations we want to make. Let us begin with his thoughts on the cross of Christ:

And if there be any sound that can produce silence, we may surely be silent about the end and the extremity; when a cry was driven out of that darkness in words dreadfully distinct and dreadfully unintelligible, which man shall never understand in all the eternity they have purchased for him; and for one annihilating instant an abyss that is not for our thoughts had opened even in the unity of the absolute; and God had been forsaken of God.

At the awful climax of the cross, the cry of the Lord Jesus was heard, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!" This cry is beyond our understanding, beyond our ability to plumb its depths. Therefore, we face the same Christian requirement that we face at every turn of life—we must walk by faith, not by sight. In order to believe what we are told in Scripture about the cross and to have our lives changed and our hearts granted life, we must embrace these truths by faith.

Therefore, I suggest that we talk about faith in order to understand that Passover weekend hundreds of years ago. Hebrews 11 has perhaps the most condensed description of faith given in the Bible. In these verses, we will encounter a man who has become a friend in our recent studies, Abraham, as he is held up as an example of faith.

Let us begin with the definition of faith given in Heb.11:1-2:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.

There are two main elements in this description of faith. First, faith concerns itself with things that have not yet happened. The word "hope" does not imply belief in things that may or may not be true. Rather, it deals with the fact that these things are future to us. We are assured about things in our future. In fact, our lives as Christians should be dominated by the future. If we are men and women of faith, our direction in life, the ending of the story and the summation of the victory of Christ on the cross should all inform our present life. Knowing where we are headed creates the values that make us the kind of people we are at the moment. We should be dominated by the future, straining forward towards it and filled with certainty about it. Then we can be different people as a result.

The future is more important than the present. I was reminded of this truth when I recently spoke with a young woman who is two months away from having her first child. She has lived in the fast lane of the American free enterprise system, on her way to beating the competition, ruthlessly climbing the corporate ladder of success. Although she was destined for material gain, the coming of a child has changed her perspective. Now that she realizes God is going to use her to bring another life into the world, she has also seen that her previous motivations—material success and victory in competition are not the only things worth living for. In fact, they are much less important than other values she had lost in the process of gaining her achievements. An event that is still in the future, the birth of a child, has changed the way she is living now by changing what she values. This has set her in a different direction; she now gives her time and energy to other things. The biblical witness is that because we know our destiny is in heaven, we ought to be people who have different values now. We ought to act and think differently and consider this world in light of the certainty of our new direction.

The second element of faith emphasizes that what is invisible is more important than what is visible. Just as the future is more important than the present, the invisible is more important than the visible. Consider what Heb.11-3 has to say regarding the invisible things: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible!" The cosmos itself came into being by the word of a spiritual being spoken into a void so that what is now visible, what is created and discernible by the five senses, came from that which is invisible. The invisible things are more important than the visible for those of us who live by faith.

Consider a human corpse. I have seen corpses only in mortuaries, dressed in the finest of clothes and made up with the best of the undertaker's artistry. Although the visual appearance seems similar to that of a living person, the two could not be more different. The invisible part of what makes us who we are—our personality, spirit, thoughts, memories, and concerns—are more important than our physical body. A body minus its invisible personality decays quickly and becomes nothing more than dust. For those of us who live by faith, we know that our invisible being is more important than what we can see.

Hebrews 11:2 talks about the result of this faith in the unseen and in the things future.

By faith, the saints of old gained approval from God, divine approval.

The first rugby game I ever saw was the one in which I played. I do not know if you have ever encountered this peculiar English game, but it bears a vague resemblance to American football. I was recently out of school and looking for a way of getting regular exercise when a friend invited me to join a local rugby club. I agreed and attended one Thursday practice. On the following Saturday, I went to the team's game only to discover that they were shorthanded and needed me to play. I trotted out on the field full of enthusiasm, vim and vigor. I expended myself energetically and really wanted to succeed, but the outcome of the day was not approval, especially from the referees. I did not know the rules or how to play the game. The instincts I still had from American football did not help me at all. When I charged ahead and crashed into people as I saw others doing, it was always at the wrong time and in the wrong place. The result was that I penalized the team rather than helped them. I sought

approval but did not receive it because I did not know how to play the game.

Hebrews tells us that there is an approval that comes from God for a heart given over to him and for the life resulting from that heart. There will be a judgment rendered when God will say to those who have loved and followed him, "Your life is valuable. It amounts to something because you have lived righteously. By becoming what you were intended to be, you have brought glory to your creator and honor to yourself. Your life is approved."

But we are born into darkness, not knowing the rules of the game of life. We start by trying to play the game before anyone has taught us how. Unless we learn from our heavenly Father what is required of us and how to succeed in that requirement, we are not going to be approved no matter how much energy we expend. The whole experience of faith believing God, following what he directs us to do and loving him for his entry into our lives allows us to become people who are approved by God.

How many things have you done in your life because you wanted someone's approval? How many times have you been driven to act, think, dress or go somewhere in the hopes that someone would express approval of you? I can think of numerous times. The hunger for approval resides in us because we are ultimately seeking the approval of God. Hebrews 11:2 tells us that faith brings about the good report from God that we are approved. In faith, we have succeeded in becoming who we ought to be. By being taught of the Spirit and changed from within, we can live with a sense of approval and look forward to a lifetime that results in further approval by God.

Now skip ahead in Hebrews 11:8-16. Faith in things we cannot see and in things that are still future brings about an understanding of how life should be lived and approval from God. In these verses, we will see how Abraham experienced this faith in his own life:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; therefore also there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

We are told two things about Abraham and Sarah. First of all, as they learned the life of faith, they rejected what this world had to offer its payoff, its institutions and its values. Abraham was offered riches by the king of Sodom, but he rejected them. You and I will be offered a payoff time and again, whether it is material things, standing in the community, release from depression, or answer to a longing. There are many opportunities for receiving life from this world and its systems. But Abraham responded, "No, I am not a citizen here. I will not settle for life that comes from this world and all it has to offer. I don't belong here! I'm a stranger, a pilgrim!" He rejected the payoff that comes from this world.

Secondly, we are told that Abraham looked forward to a heavenly reward. He did not just say "no" to the things of this life, but he said "yes" to the life to come. He did not want to be a sojourner all his life. He longed for the city that would last forever, whose architect and builder is God.

To return to G.K. Chesterton: he notes that Jesus' burial ended the possibility that what this world has to offer will satisfy us. He concluded that all of human history itself was buried with Jesus Christ.

It was well that the tomb should be sealed with all the secrecy of ancient eastern sepulture and guarded by the authority of the Caesars. For in that cavern the whole of that great and glorious humanity which we call antiquity was gathered up and covered over; and in that place it was buried. It was the end of a very great thing called human history; the history that was merely human. The mythologies and the philosophies were buried there, the gods and heroes and the sages. In the great Roman phrase, they had lived. But as they could only live, so they could only die; and they were dead.

What was buried in the tomb of Christ was all this life has to offer and the hope that what we produce in our own energy and ability can bring results. This life raised in rebellion against God can succeed in nothing better than being crucified and buried. The best people we can produce the philosophers, sages, and heroes are all buried in Jesus' tomb. Abraham said, "I will not sink roots into this life!" He determined to believe that the life this world has to offer, be it material, social or gain of any sort, is not valuable enough to build a life upon. He said, "I am headed for a city that has foundations, and I will live based on that decision!"

At the beginning of our discussion, I urged you to evaluate yourself as to your convictions. What kind of payoff do you want in life? What sort of things do you hope to gain as you make your choices in life? Do the invisible things matter more to you than the visible? Are you straining forward for a heavenly future, or are you caught up in building something using only the equipment that we have before us? Which dominates your life: the future or the present, the visible or the invisible? Are you hoping that what was covered in Christ's tomb, mere human history, can somehow give life to you?

The last words about Abraham in Hebrews are found in Heb.11:17-19:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called!" He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type.

When Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac, he knew that God had already said that Isaac was to have children. Thus he concluded, as the writer of Hebrews deduced, that God would give life from the dead to Isaac if it was required.

Hebrews 11:17 reminds us of what Genesis 22 said: Abraham was tested in these things. It is not only important that we be convinced about the future and the invisible things; it is also important at the moment we are tested, when we are under the most pressure, that we say, "I serve a God who gives life from the dead if it is necessary. I will trust him, and I will not resort to any other source for life no matter what I am called to face!" Abraham's convictions were correct. And beyond his convictions when he was tested, he stood firm in his trust of God and said, "I serve a God who gives life from the dead!"

What does your evaluation reveal when you consider the tests that you have faced and are perhaps facing even now? Do you trust God to give you life, or have you resorted to some other savior? How do you fare under pressure?

Because it is Easter, we are being asked to evaluate ourselves. What have you discovered? Scripture calls death the final enemy and reminds us that a day is coming when death will be swallowed up in victory. We have read Chesterton's descriptions of the death and burial of Jesus. Now we want to look at what he has to say about the resurrection. He insists that it was the beginning of something new. That morning and empty grave did not just apply to Jesus. The resurrection applies to us as well because it guarantees the future toward which we are straining. It gives us reason to believe in a God whom we cannot see even though he could not be more present among us. The resurrection makes a difference in who we will become. Chesterton says that the day of Christ's

rising was the dawn, the first day of a new creation.

As we perform our evaluation, I think we need to ask if we are living for that glorious and eternal future that began with the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps we have been clinging to this life, this world and its system which are all subject to death. When that death is swallowed up and passed away, along with it will go all that we have become if we have depended upon this life only. Which are we people living for an eternal heavenly future or people committed to this world and all that it represents?

Listen to Chesterton's description of the resurrection:

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth, and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.

Would you take a moment to consider the things we have discussed? Think about yourself and who you are becoming. Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Are you living life based upon what you see in this world or based upon what you know to be true of God?

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