

Your God Won't Save You, But Jesus...

Romans 1:24-25

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Easter. The resurrection of Jesus. Christians all over the world are celebrating Jesus' resurrection today. We are too. Most are telling the story of Easter Sunday morning. Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus. The disciples running here and there trying to figure out what happened. An angel announcing, "*He is not here, he is risen.*" Jesus suddenly standing in the upper room. The story of that first Easter Sunday.

Today I'm going to talk about the mess that required Jesus to die and be resurrected to fix it. The back story. The prequel. The condition of the world was so apparently horrific that only the death of the Son of God could possibly fix it.

Solutions are an indication of how bad the problem is. D-day is a testimony to the horrific atrocities of Nazi Germany. The Great Wall of China is a testimony to the problem of invaders from the north. You get the idea. The bigger the problem, the bigger the solution required.

The death and resurrection of the Son of God. If that is the solution, how bad must the problem be?

Our teaching series at Bethel is exploring a letter in the Bible entitled Romans. It is a wonderful and sobering description of the human predicament and its solution. Paul says our true problem isn't our health or our family or our finances or our governments. Our problem is God. Specifically, that he is morally righteous and we are not. Why is that a problem? Because God's justice requires punishment for sins against his moral nature.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." (Romans 1:18 ESV)

He says the wrath of God is set against us. We can deny that, but God said the evidence of his judgment would be our physical decay. Anyone reading this look better this Easter than last? And this is just the beginning of God's judgment for our sin. Death and eternal punishment are our forever experience of God's wrath. Now we begin to see the scale of the problem.

"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." (Romans 1:19)

He anticipates people standing before God and saying, *Hey, I didn't know anything. Nobody ever told me nothing. How can I be punished for what I didn't know?* Paul says God has revealed both his existence and divine nature through the majesty and grandeur of creation. Every day we live in this world of wonder and beauty which God intended to communicate his existence and his glory.

I've illustrated it in a way before that I can't improve on, so I'll just tell it again. Some of you may not know my story. I got married when I was 44 after 25 years of praying for a

wife and praying for children and God gave me a wife and God quickly gave me children, so I'm a little late to the daddy party, but I am enjoying it thoroughly. I've got two daughters, a 4-year-old and a 2-year-old and now when I go home, rather than being quiet like it was for all those years in my bachelor pastor days, now there is a lot of activity in the house.

So I come in the door and it's such a joy to hear, "Daddy!" They hug and they kiss, and right away they want to play. And I say "No, we're going to memorize verses now." No, I say, "Yes, let's play!" And so they say, "Let's play hide and seek!" So I say, "You girls go hide." And they go off and they hide and in fact this week, we were playing and we took a picture:



There's my two-year-old. Isn't that ingenious? She has no future as a sniper. So anyway, I count to 10 and I say, "Ready or not, here I come!" And I'll say "Where are those girls?" A half a second later I hear, "We're over here!" Why? They want to be found. They make noise because they want to be found. "I'm over here!"

Every day God is making noises in the sunrise and sunset, in the vastness of the galaxy, and coffee in the morning that he is there and what he is like. Why? God is saying, *I'm over here!* This would be clear to us except we suppress the truth about God. We deny it and we deny him.

"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21)

Despite the daily testimony of a beautiful creation, man refuses to worship the one true God. By "worship," Paul means to live with God as our ultimate; for the one true God to be the God of our lives and hearts. No. Man in his sin lives in denial of what is true. God is vastly more glorious, significant, and important than we are. Like a barge that breaks loose from its moorings, mankind's thinking drifted further and further from the truth. Our worship is wrong. Our thinking is wrong. And our living is wrong.

Of all the claims in the Bible, this is the easiest one to prove. Just look around. Look in the paper. Look in your family dynamics. Look in your heart. We are a seriously messed up people. Paul ends this chapter with 21 moral evidences of man's departure from God. These include: murder, strife, slander, deceit, pride, envy, disobedience to parents. Is this not the world you and I live in? Why is it this way? We refuse to live in a worship relationship with our Creator.

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:24-25)

The bottom line is that in spite of God's glory and goodness, mankind demanded freedom to think and live the way he wanted. As John Stott says, "*Scripture is quite clear that the essence of sin is godlessness. It is the attempt to get rid of God, and, since that is impossible, the determination to live as though one had succeeded in doing so.*"¹ This is not easy to do when the whole universe shouts of God's glory and goodness every day. How can we possibly live as if there is no God? Our solution? Replace God.

Embrace the Lie: Something Other Than God Will Satisfy/Bring Meaning to Life

"Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie." (Romans 1:25)

When God created us, he wired our souls to live for something greater than ourselves. We all do. We are all living for something or someone. The Bible calls this worship. Whoever or whatever we look to for ultimate significance, comfort, and hope is our god. What is that for you?

In case you are confused or uncertain, Paul says that no matter what our god, there are two things that mark our relationship with our god. We worship our god and we serve our god. *"Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and **worshiped** and **served** the creature rather than the Creator."* (Romans 1:25, emphasis added)

What is the lie? Life has more meaning and happiness with a different god. Believing this lie not only dethrones God in our hearts, it replaces him. We trade gods. The actual God is out and the replacement god is in. The Bible calls these idols. These are the things or aspirations to which we attach our true affections, hopes, and desires. We venerate them by constantly thinking about them, talking about them, dreaming about them. Our time and money flow effortlessly to them.

You may say, *I don't have a god like that.* But then I go to your house to watch the ball game and we go down to your man cave and here's this massive tribute to your favorite team, your favorite NASCAR driver, or the deer you shot when you were 12. It's that thing that makes you feel like you're something, that your life matters; everybody has them. It could be your family, your job, a relationship, or something you hope could be true in your life that you're still seeking after. Whatever that thing is, that is your god. We have elevated it to a place of importance. You may not view it as a god, but God views it as a god if you have replaced him with it. You may not call it your god, but all the signs of religious worship are there. If they were taken from us, our lives would struggle to have any meaning. Our fears are often connected to the loss of them. Trace your time, trace your money, trace your thoughts, trace your fears and they will lead you to the real god of your heart.

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 72.

Is not our world a global testimony to how disappointing man-made gods turn out to be? It turns out that when God gives us over to our demand for independence, we sure make a mess of the place. Can anyone doubt that?

As a pastor for 25 years I have seen behind the picture-perfect Christmas cards and Facebook posts to the real lives people are living. These gods we hope will save us turn out to be incredibly disappointing. *Live for money* and the richest people in the world will tell you, you never have enough. *Live for the perfect family* and your family will be incredibly disappointing. *Live for approval of others* and you will quickly be shocked at how little time people spend thinking about you. *Live for beauty or the perfect body* and you will be enslaved to the gym, eating disorders, or Botox. *Live for career advancement* and it will likely cost you your family. *Live for possessions* and you will never have enough of them. *Live for sex* and no partner or porn will ever be enough. *Live for politics* and your political heroes will disappoint you. *Live for admiration of your religious spirituality* and you and your kids will be crushed by attempts at self-righteousness. *Live for anything* other than the one true God and in the end we despair because ultimately we die and none of the replacement gods have anything to offer in the next life. *They ruin us in this life and they damn us in the next.* Like drinking saltwater to satisfy our thirst, we only end up thirstier. The more we drink the thirstier we are.

*"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*² (C.S. Lewis)

I live this now as a dad. My oldest (4) is a thrill seeker. My youngest (2) is more hesitant. Her first inclination is to hug our legs. So a month ago we took them sledding. It was the first time for Madeline. She watched the kids going down and she didn't want to do it. We encouraged her. Begged her. Finally, Mommy had to basically force her on the sled and go down with her. You know what she said when she got to the bottom? *Can I do that again?* She thought she was happier NOT sledding. But then she discovered she was missing out.

Like Lewis says, *We are making mud pies in a slum.* We were born in this sin slum of a world. It is all we have known. We appropriate the values of the slum. We think the mud pies are awesome and try to construct our whole life's purposes on them. Why? That's all we've known and everybody else we know lives for these things and acts as if they are really important. The mud pies. The gods of our culture.

What is Easter About?

This Easter I want you to consider that Jesus' resurrection was God's personal invitation through his Son Jesus to leave the slum and to go to the beach. To sled down the hill. To leave the emptiness of the fake god and to live for the real one. Not that your family or career or health or whatever are no longer important. God created these things and they have their place. Rather it is dethroning them from being gods in our lives and detaching our ultimate significance from them.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, p. 26.

Why should we do that? *Christ was raised from the dead*. It means many things, but one thing it surely means is that the one true God is inviting us to leave a life of mud pies and counterfeit gods to be restored to a life lived in a joyful relationship with Him. Jesus described that restoration as like being born again.

The apostle John tells of Jesus' resurrection. He was there. He describes hearing the women tell him and Peter that the tomb was empty. Peter and John ran to the tomb and looked in. This was John's moment, "*Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.*" (John 20:8) The empty tomb was enough for John to place his personal faith in Jesus as Savior and resurrected Lord. After telling all that happened on that Easter Sunday, John summarizes his whole gospel with this:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30–31)

This is not a message of proofs that Jesus was resurrected. We have done those. There are shelves of books available dealing with the believability of the resurrection. Might you be one of those insightful people who secretly hope that this world and all its mess *isn't* all there is? Doesn't our despair at our lives, society, government, and people whisper to our soul that we were made for something more? Something better?

What if Jesus was resurrected as so many eyewitnesses attest? What if that resurrection is God's invitation to you personally to live for something that would satisfy those longings of your soul?

John says that by believing in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God we may have life in his name. *Life?* What does that mean? It certainly means eternal life which is a wonderful part of God's salvation. While we die physically, Jesus promised those who believe in him will experience an eternal existence of life with God forever. Eternal life is a glorious promise and hope within the Christian message.

But that is not what John says here. By believing you may have life someday? No. you may have life *now*. What life? A life freed from the emptiness of living for created things. For stuff. For self. A life freed to live from enslavement to our gods. A life lived for God our creator in a relationship of forgiveness, mercy, grace, and love.

Jesus said, "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10) Jesus offers that. No fake god in this world can deliver on it. They enslave, corrode, and degrade us.

This brings me to Steve Kellemen. He was a normal Region-type guy. Living his life. Doing his thing. But slowly something became too important. Alcohol quit being an occasional pleasure drink and became an escape for him. Then it became a dependency. Eventually it became a bondage. Like all fake gods, it slowly demanded his total allegiance and it slowly devastated him. His family loved him and I was privy to some of the incredible love expressions given to Steve over the years. They are to be commended for their sacrificial care. But alcohol—like money or video games or sex can—slowly took over his life. No amount of family love or pleasing or distractions could free him from it. Nothing except what happened just days before he died.

It took his niece Marie who came to our church on Easter Sunday two years ago. She heard a message about the emptiness of life apart from God. Marie had been living away from God for some years. God used that Easter message and she renewed her commitment to Christ. That led to a moment when she shared faith in Jesus with her uncle Steve. By then alcohol and cancer had decayed his body and no treatment could save him. Marie loved him and wanted him to know the freedom she had found in Christ.

She shared her story of returning to Jesus as her first love and God used it in Steve's heart. He realized that while he *wanted* another drink, what he really *needed* was to restore God to the first place in his heart. He did that by believing Jesus was the Son of God and Savior who died on the cross for his sins. He believed Jesus is the resurrected Savior. The freedom he felt after a prayer of faith commitment is seen on his face in this selfie taken just after he confessed Christ.



Like the famous thief on the cross, Steve was saved in the last days of his life. Look at that picture. The look on his face (he's the second person from the left). Joy. Freedom. Real life. No drink or fake god could ever deliver that.

Alcohol may not be your god, but what is? Who is? Who are you serving? Who are you really living for? Jesus' cross and resurrection are God's invitation to leave the slum and the mud pies to experience real life lived with the real God enthroned in your heart.

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