

"Is Your Religion Sufficient?"
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What difference would it make to you if the resurrection of Jesus had never occurred?

In the Washington Post a couple of years ago a prominent theologian of our country was asked on Good Friday, "What if Christ hadn't risen from the dead?"

He replied, "If the bones of Jesus were found tomorrow, it would make no difference to me. I would go on going to church as would the majority of Christians." (World Magazine 3/30/96 p.26)

How about you? Would it make any difference to you if Jesus had never risen from the dead?

I want to remind you this morning that it makes all the difference in the world.

Every person has a religion.

Maybe your religion is very private, doesn't have any national headquarters, and doesn't expect you to give any money - but you have a religion.

Many don't think of it as a religion, but as simply what they believe.

Nonetheless, every person lives by his or her beliefs – making certain assumptions about life and death.

Since we all have a religion, it seems reasonable to expect certain things from that religion.

And if our religion doesn't provide these things our religion isn't worth much.

At least three things our religion ought to do for us:

1. It ought to show us how to come to peace with our past.
2. It ought to give us a worthwhile reason for living.
3. It ought to give us a hope for a future beyond the grave.

In other words, any religion worth its salt should help us live with our past, our present and our future.

A few years ago a woman called and met with me describing what seemed to her the total shambles her life was in.

As a teenager she had become pregnant by a man 10 years her senior.

Her father was so grieved and possibly humiliated that when she was three months pregnant, he killed himself.

Her mother had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized.

She put the baby up for adoption.

She soon married, but nine years later that marriage ended in divorce.

Living with constant feelings of guilt for her pregnancy, her father's death, her mother's depression and her own failure at marriage, she attempted to kill herself.

Desperately seeking somewhere to belong but feeling unworthy of anything better, she lived in and out of the house of a man who was in worse shape than she was.

For the past 24 years she had lived with guilt, purposelessness and finally hopelessness.

Her religion had failed her.

She had no way of dealing with her past, no worthwhile purpose for the present and no hope for the future.

How does your religion, how does what you believe, deal with your past, present and future?

What about the past?

How does your religion deal with your past?

When I was 16 years of age I finally came to full realization that face to face with a holy God I didn't stand a chance, if I was judged by Him.

I knew I had done things that were very wrong - wrong toward my parents, wrong toward others and wrong toward God.

I felt guilt for those things and the more I thought about it the more guilty I felt.

There are some whose religion, whether it is private or institutional, tells them to ignore their guilt - pretending to themselves that either what they did wasn't so bad or that it doesn't matter anymore.

But if you have felt guilt - and everyone of us has - then you know that you can't successfully ignore guilt.

It will continually rear its ugly head and interfere at the most inopportune time.

But it is not just a matter of feeling guilty - there is the issue of actually being guilty.

Yes, there is such a thing as false guilt - feeling guilty for things we didn't do or things that aren't actually wrong.

Some wag said about paranoia that "you aren't paranoid if they are really after you."

So it is with guilt - it isn't false guilt if you actually did it.

Our conscience tells us that not only are we guilty for our sin against others but we have also offended a holy God.

We have a "built-in" understanding that something is not right between us and God - and that something is our sin.

Others may have a religion (again private or institutional) that tells them to make up for their sin.

Live better in the future and that will compensate for what you did in the past.

But guilt won't go away so easily - it demands justice - somebody has to pay for what happened.

What I learned at 17, and what I had the privilege of showing that woman who for 24 years had lived under the pressure of her guilt, was that guilt can't be successfully ignored and it can't be bought off with promises of better living in the future.

There is only one remedy for our sin, only one antidote for real guilt - we have to die.

Real justice says the wages of sin is death.

You may say that's a little harsh!

You can say that but I can guarantee you that you can't deal with real guilt by pretending it isn't that bad.

God is the one who said, the wages of sin is death.

And the Bible also says that Jesus died for our sins.

Jesus, who had no sin of his own, took the very real guilt for my sin and yours on himself and paid the price for sin - he died for us, in our place - justice was served.

That night at 17, with God's help, I chose to believe that Jesus died for me, for my sins - that the very real guilt that was mine was taken by him.

God said, that when I believe him for that, he forgives me.

What an incredible word - forgiveness.

It isn't that I didn't do those things that were wrong.

It isn't that they weren't all that bad.

It isn't that I have made up for them in some way.

They were wrong, they were that bad or worse, I could never make up for what I have done - but in spite of all that, because of Jesus' death in my place - I am forgiven.

What a privilege it was to tell that woman that she too could be fully, forever, forgiven.

She could bring all that junk from the past and drop it at the cross of Jesus - knowing that he died for her sins too. Justice was done - there is no more payment, no more real guilt.

If she would simply believe Jesus, she too would be fully forgiven. That was God's promise.

But how do we know this is true?

How do we know that Jesus' death satisfied justice?

How do we know that God forgives us?

We know its true, because Jesus is alive, because he rose from the dead.

Jesus claimed he is God.

He claimed he would die for the sins of his people, he claimed he would rise from the dead to prove he is God and has the power over sin and death itself.

Then he rose from the dead!

No one else ever, by his own power, has risen from the dead.

Because he lives you can know that what he claimed about his death was true - his death was to satisfy the justice our sins deserved.

Now if Jesus did not rise from the dead, what can you reasonably conclude?
Jesus was a deluded fool or the worst liar ever.

But what else can you conclude?

You still bear full responsibility for your sins and justice will yet prevail - you will die for your sins.

A holy God will yet demand full payment for your sins against him and others.

Your past is unchanged - you are still guilty.

The Apostle Paul said it this way in I Corinthians 15, which we read earlier: "If Christ has not been raised... you are still in your sins."

Does it make any difference if Jesus rose from the dead?

It makes all the difference in the world.

Does your religion provide forgiveness - real, blood-bought forgiveness?

Does your religion provide true peace with God - a true peace with your past?

There's a second thing a good religion ought to provide - it ought to give you a worthwhile reason for living.

At 17, by God's grace, I came to an understanding of how the past is dealt with.

At 19, by God's grace, I came to an understanding of how the present is lived.

I remember so well sitting hour after hour in Como Park in St Paul, Minnesota laboring over what my life was about, where was I headed, what was worth living for.

It was an intense intellectual and emotional struggle.

It seemed I had three choices:

1. Hedonism - "eat, drink and be merry, tomorrow we die."
Go for broke and take all I could get out of life, having no idea of when it would be over.

2. My second choice was suicide - figuratively speaking.
Though some reach this point in life and do literally consider suicide - I didn't.

But one option was the figurative suicide I saw all around me.

The people who just exist and bump along through life like a ball in a pinball machine - numb, never engaging, just existing but not living.

3. My third choice was to follow Christ.

At that point in my life, the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament were captivating to me.

I read these paraphrased verses among others: Philippians 3:7,8,12 "Whatever I considered worthwhile before (like money, a certain career, a reputation, etc.) I now consider worthless compared to knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. And from this day forward, his purposes for me will be my purposes for me."

Which should I choose?

It all seemed to hang on one event in history.
Did Jesus actually rise from the dead?

The Apostle Paul saw it that way also.

He said if Christ is dead - never rose from the dead, why on earth is he breaking his neck for other people, why risk his life for merely human reasons, there is no profit in it.

If the dead are not raised, if Jesus is actually dead - then "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

But if he rose, then he is who he said he is!

He is alive, He is God, He is king.
He knows my life - from beginning to end.
He is coming again like he said.

He has a kingdom that he is bringing to completion.
He has the right to rule in my life.

There is a reason for living that transcends just getting up, going to work, playing on the weekends, taking vacations and enjoying retirement.

What fool would not align his life with the only one who has risen from the dead?

If Jesus is alive then not only has the past been dealt with but the choice for the present is obvious - for me to live is Christ!

It was my great privilege that afternoon in my office to tell that woman with 24 years of guilt and frustration that her life could take on a whole new and eternal purpose - no longer chasing things that couldn't last but now pursuing things that couldn't possibly fade away.

A person's religion ought to deal not only with the past but also with the present.

Does your religion, does what you believe, give you enough reason to live?

Lastly, how does your religion deal with the future?

Specifically how does what you believe handle death?

Like people standing around and talking in a room where there is an elephant but nobody mentions the elephant - so it is with many people's religion - death is there but nobody talks about it.

Many people have a religion, their private belief, which simply tries to ignore death.

I'm certainly not suggesting we ought to think about death all the time.

But death is too real and too certain not to know what will happen.

Death is too much in our faces each day not to think about it.

It is the Damocles' sword that hangs over all of life.

Someone said that in fact you aren't really ready to live until you are ready to die.

Friday, I attended the funeral of a three-week old baby.

How do you possibly emotionally or intellectually accommodate/deal with the death of your child?

Last Monday I spent time talking with a friend whose wife is facing a life-threatening cancer.

How does anyone deal with the real and immediate prospect of death?

Bob Heykoop stood before us today and spoke of his thankfulness for and confidence in God – Bob has cancer – how does he do that?

My in-laws, whom I loved dearly, are dead.

Is that it? Is it all over? Do I never see them again?

Some people content themselves with a religion that says our loved ones live on in our memories.

Others say that death is just part of life – as if that is supposed to bring some kind of conclusion to the matter.

Who are we trying to kid – death stinks!!!

Again I think the Apostle Paul nailed it – if death is the end then of all people Christians are most to be pitied – what fools!

If death brings nothingness – then hedonism or despair seem the only two reasonable responses to life.

Is death the end? Is this all there is – we live, die and that's it?

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, no one has any reasonable hope of anything else but death.

Your religion can concoct all kinds of ideas about life hereafter.

But you have no reason to believe any of them – it's all wishful thinking.

But if Jesus rose from the dead, imagine the possibilities.

He said that when he comes again he will resurrect the bodies of everyone who belongs to him and they will spend eternity in his presence in very real, physical, recognizable bodies.

Not only that, but all those who trusted in Christ will also be with each other.

Is it reasonable to believe that?

Yes, if Jesus rose from the dead – if he is alive today.

When Jesus rose from the dead he proved he has the power to conquer death itself.

Again the Apostle Paul captured the essence of it with these words:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?”

Here's the way Jerry and LeAnne Lau of our church said it after losing a son:

“We stared at death and death did seem to own the day.

Our loved one's gone, we thought we had no power against its sway.

But gently then our faith, relit by God's own word

And prayers of saints, brought trust that Jesus was still Lord.

“We stared at death, but death no longer seemed to own the day.

It could not win - its power to separate, at last, will fade away.

Death was not King, but merely the last thing we would defeat.

The promise was sure: our loved one some day once again we'll meet.

Can your religion do that?

Does your religion deal with the past – does it bring real forgiveness?

Does your religion deal with the present – give you a legitimate reason to live?

Does your religion deal with the future – give you a sure and certain hope beyond the grave?

It only can, if your religion is the religion of the risen Jesus.

Does the resurrection matter?

Only for the past, the present and the future!

Only faith in Jesus provides life worth living.