

WHAT DID CHRIST CHANGE?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Psalm 118:14-24; John 20:1-18

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Did you know that there is a scholarly quest to uncover the historical Jesus? In academia some maintain that we do not have an accurate picture of Jesus in the gospels. They distrust the gospels for three reasons primarily. First, they are uncomfortable with miracles like the resurrection we celebrate. Only a generation ago, there was a movement to *demythologize* Jesus, to separate Jesus from the miraculous, and some attempts to explain Jesus' miracles were funny. A second reason for distrust of the gospels is that they are not dispassionate biographies. The gospels stir faith in Jesus. Skeptics feel the writers might have played loose with the truth, invented stories and sayings, in order to achieve that effect. The trouble with that argument is that each gospel writer suffered persecution for what they asserted. How many of us are willing to suffer and die for lies? Not a single disciple of Jesus recanted a word. A third reason for distrust is that some think unknown people wrote the gospels a century after Jesus. They once suggested that the gospel of John was written nearly 150 years after Jesus died. Unfortunately for them, fragments of that gospel have been found that date to the late first century or early second century. There can be no gap or unknown author.

The skeptical quest for a historical Jesus continues, however, unabated. Scholars find something historical and try to conform Jesus to it. For some, wherever Jesus sounds like a 1st Century Jewish rabbi, they tell us that is the historical Jesus. For others, wherever Jesus' words could not possibly serve the interest of the church, that is all they trust to be historical.

The television show, **Good Morning America**, invited a couple scholarly believers to react to this quest. Both maintained that the shifting sands of scientific research do not alter their faith. They said that the power and attractiveness of the message today is not so much in what happened long ago but in what it accomplishes today in the lives of those who believe. I agree. **We are not here merely to commemorate a**

historical event. We celebrate that and we consider also how the power of the resurrection affects both our lives now and the future before us.

The Apostle Paul declared, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."* He did not say, *"I am not ashamed because it is factual history."* Paul gave his life to spread the gospel not because it was historically true, but because it made all the difference in human destiny. He sacrificed for the gospel because of what it brought to people's lives: freedom, hope, transformation and reconciliation. For the apostle, historical truth was not irrelevant. It was very relevant. As a converted Jewish rabbi who suffered rejection and persecution from his colleagues and relatives, he said, *"If Christ did not rise, I am of all men to be most pitied."*

What happened to Christ was critical to Paul because the message and faith of the early church was focused on Jesus and not just things he taught. The Jewish Rabbi Paul believed in Jesus, not only some teachings of his. Skeptics think that early Christianity must have been about ethics or worship or service because for all other religions, the worship of the teacher came later, after many years. However, from the beginning Christianity has been about Christ! It is about one man who suffered as the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied, who died as those same Scriptures foretold, who rose on the third day and appeared to many witnesses. **That historical truth gave birth to Christian faith, and Christian faith gave birth to new and transformed lives.**

On the day of resurrection, a broken woman wept by an empty tomb. Her eyes were swollen; her nose ran. Her name was Mary, and the gospels tell us that Jesus had driven out several demons from her. She had lived a tormented life. Now she felt torment again. Her peace disappeared with the body of Jesus. She suffered. You know the feeling, if you've had your hopes crushed. Have you felt snake-bitten, poisoned, like the world is against you? If so, you can identify with Mary on that first Easter. All that she loved, hoped and dreamed for was lost.

I often deal with loss. Sometimes, I'm by the bedsides of people who've been stripped bare of hope for a future in this life. Disease has robbed them of strength to eat or even talk. Sometimes, it is individuals whose hopes and confidence are crushed as spouses move out. Still others lose their life-mate. The empty house

provokes sorrow repeatedly. For others, it's the departure of prodigal children; and for others, it is the loss of self-respect and reputation as they suffer the ravages of their own sins. In each case, people share Mary's pain. Life seems God-forsaken. God seems AWOL, absent without leave. However, even when God was clearly at work, Mary could not see it through her pain. When she saw the empty tomb, she saw loss rather than gain. When she conversed with the angels, she didn't know whom she was talking to. When Jesus approached her, she thought he was someone else. She was unaware of who was with her! There was power for her in the resurrection, and she was clueless. Could that be true for you?

What depresses you? What discourages you? What frustrates you? What haunts you? What are you facing and what are you seeing? Is it possible that you are missing something very, very important?

There was a tender and pivotal moment in Mary's life, and there is one for you. That moment for Mary was when she heard her name.

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" [which means Teacher]. (John 20:16, NIV)

In that moment Mary recognized her teacher, her help, her hope. That's not only true of Mary. When slave trader, John Newton, heard his name and realized that God forgave him, he was a different man. He helped end the slave trade and put his story to song in his hymn **Amazing Grace**. Charles Wesley, the brother of the founder of Methodism, plagued by doubts and conscience, heard his name called and penned the song **Amazing Love** relating his experience. Charles went on to pen 6000 songs to help others find life in Jesus Christ.

It's that way today. When you hear Christ call your name, when you recognize that it is your sins for which he died, when you realize that he has taken your guilt away and given you personally life eternal, you want to cling to him like Mary. Your heart is flooded with relief, and overwhelmed with love.

Mary wrapped her arms about Jesus, but Jesus told her that this was not the time for that. Instead, this was the time for her to tell her friends the message that would upset the world. The man Jesus has risen.

What did Christ change? First, he changed the future for you and me. He made us immortals. He changed the grip of death. It can hurt us. It can still sting, but it can no longer beat us. We have the antidote, and death is beaten. Second, Jesus changed our need to cover up or excuse our sins. We can be honest because

he has paid our penalty and taken our judgment. Third, he changed our picture of God and our relationship with God. God is not aloof. He's very much involved in our daily life. There's not a moment that we are alone. We can walk with God and enjoy intimacy.

He's changed so much that perhaps this reading that is familiar to many of you can summarize it better.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until He was 30. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He was a defender of unpopular causes. He counted among His friends the poor and the weak. He associated with outcasts and lawbreakers. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled more than two hundred miles from His place of birth. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but Himself... He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nearly 2,000 years have come and gone, and today He is the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, all these together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that... ONE SOLITARY LIFE.

What has Christ changed? He has changed the fortunes of humanity, but has he changed you? The one solitary life he lived was for love of you. He is the shepherd of the single, wandering sheep. He is the savior of the lonely individual, not just the world? The power of his resurrection is for you now. It is not only to give you a future. It is to transform your life right now. Are you a witness of that resurrection power? You can be, and you are meant to be.