

## **Death, burial, resurrection – now what?**

Rhys Thomas

The resurrection of Jesus was, is, and shall always be the pivotal point of human history. The empty tomb is proof that Jesus is who He said, that He will do what He promised. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are “of first importance” because they are evidence. Christianity is the only religion on earth that is based on evidence, that can be proven to be true.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are not primarily about forgiveness but about victory. Certainly, the sacrifice of Jesus was in progress on the cross, but the rest of the process took place both before and some time later. Yet, many churches seem satisfied with stopping with the story at the cross, with the beginnings of forgiveness. As I put on our sign one week, “Forgiveness just gets you even; faith puts you in the black.” Focusing on forgiveness leaves us weak, as forgiven failures, rather than as “super-conquerors” as Paul described Christians in Romans 8:37.

The resurrection is of “first importance,” but there is much more to this story. The rest of the story is what frees us from guilt in a realistic way, not just convincing ourselves that it doesn’t matter. The rest of the story makes us active and essential participants in God’s plan, not those along for the ride. A gathering of Christians is not for the purpose of worship; we worship all the time. We gather to revitalize ourselves for the fight to rescue not ourselves but those rapidly approaching a very bad end. We are not the audience at God’s performance, but the players, the soldiers, the priests who not only overcome themselves but also die that others may live.

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is of first importance because those events were predicted centuries in advance and came true - evidence. Unfortunately, churches have remodeled them into something they are not. To make their illusions work, the arguments need to get complicated and use big words so the hearer will lose track of the train of thought and miss the leaps in logic. Then the listeners are told to blame themselves for being too stupid to follow this wonderful story and just believe the nonsense.

Four very important things happened after, more like “along with,” the resurrection. It is all one process, and it is simple. I could describe it with religion words like fulfillment, , atonement, sanctification, indwelling, and glory. But I would rather use words we understand, like proof, debt paid, cleaned up, souped up, and partner. In this description of “the rest of the story,” my objective is to tell you why each of those things matter, why they should be important to each of us. First, I’ll define what each one is as simply as I know how – and if it is not simple enough for you, it’s my fault for being unclear. Then, I will give brief examples of where that idea is talked about in the New Testament (one each, not all of them). But the important point is to describe why this is really good news that will make your life on earth work so much better than the lives of those around you that they will have to ask how you do it.

The good news does not end with the resurrection. As recorded at the end of each of the gospels and at the beginning of Acts, Jesus spent the next 40 day after the resurrection with his disciples and more than 500 other people. Then, as recorded in Acts 1, He went home. The religion word is the Ascension. What then? As it says in Hebrews 1:3, “When He had purged sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High.” In between His going home in Acts 1 and sitting down in Hebrews 1, four very important things happened.

First, Jesus finished the sacrifice that began much earlier. As recorded in Hebrews 9:11 – 12, “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things that have come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats

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and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”

Think about Jewish sacrifices, which were set up by God as illustrations of the reality that Jesus would accomplish. Sacrifices were prepared in advance, as Jesus was prepared during His whole earthly ministry.

The violence of Jesus’ death really was not a part of His position as a sacrifice, but rather as a demonstration of His victory over death, as in Hebrews 2:14 – 15, “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared the same, that through death He might destroy the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” If Jesus had lived to the age of 97 and died quietly in His sleep, making the claim that He conquered death might be difficult. The injustice and violence of His death illustrated victory over the power of death, the power of the devil. The violence was about victory, not about sacrifice. Faithful Jewish people did not torture their sacrifices.

The death of the sacrificial animal was not the focal point of the sacrifice process. The sacrifice was prepared, sometimes for nearly a year, then it was brought before God and killed. We focus on the killing because we are separated from it by sanitized, cellophane-wrapped Styrofoam trays of nearly bloodless meat in the grocery store. They killed animals almost every day. The killing was not the point. It was the offering of the blood, which Jesus did in heaven after He went home. Then there was the sacrificial meal, which we celebrate when we get together. The sacrifice of Jesus was just getting started on the cross. The next part of the story was played out in the real Temple in heaven, and the church plays out the sacrificial meal as long as the earth exists, one sacrifice for all for all time.

So, why should this be important to me? It’s a nice picture, but what makes this useful? Just as the Jewish High Priest offered a sacrifice for the sins of the nation once per year in the copy of the Temple that was in Jerusalem, Jesus offered Himself in the true Temple once for all time. When we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, we are forgiven – once. We are not forgiven every time we mess up. We are not stuck in a revolving door. There is a clean-up promise that is the next thing that Jesus did when He went home, but the forgiveness part happens just once.

Does that mean I can do whatever I want? As Paul put it, “Shall we sin all the more that grace may abound?” Certainly not. Remember, forgiveness just gets you even. Faith puts you in the black. You don’t go to heaven because you are forgiven, but because you have faith. Your debt to the system of right and wrong was paid off by Jesus so you could be transferred to a new system in which the coin of the realm is faith – trusting the humanly impossible promises of God. You were not left in a hopeless cycle of moral bankruptcy, but you were conveyed to the system God has had prepared since before the beginning. Creation is an incubator for faith; that is God’s purpose. Struggling through life in a system of right and wrong is hopeless. But you can’t get into the faith retirement system with bad debts hanging over your head from your previous bad choice of trying to make it on your own.

The good news is founded on evidence: death, burial, and resurrection as predicted. The next step happened in heaven. Those of faith are like a failing business, drowning in debt. Jesus purchased our debt and repurposed our assets based on our belief that He will accomplish the humanly impossible through us. What we did before taking advantage of the buy-out offer is paid off. We don’t need to make up for it; it is paid. We don’t need to feel guilty about it; those holding our bad debts did not get a tiny percentage of what was due to them like our bankruptcy

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courts do. Our creditors have been paid in full. Don't bemoan your past failure in an impossible business climate; thank the guy who paid off your ill-advised debts.

The next step in the story: clean-up. Next time you see an environmental disaster in the news, think of us. We make short-sighted, self-serving choices that result in, surprise, a massive oil spill. What comes next? Clean-up. No matter who is at fault, somebody has to clean up that mess.

Faithful people still make bad choices. Just look at the life histories of those whom God called faithful. They lied, cheated, murdered, and more. The difference is this. In the right and wrong system, you are borrowing against yourself, using your freedom as collateral. When you can't pay off the debt, hell owns you; you are a slave. In the faith system, when you make a bad choice, you grieve the Holy Spirit, you dirty up the Temple of God, you make God look bad, you make yourself ineffective for saving others. But where's the debt? If you are of faith like Abraham, God already owns you. Certainly, you have not lost your ability to choose, and you could make the dumbest choice of all time of opting out of the paid-up faith system for a sure-fire failure in the right-and-wrong system. But God is not going to sell you. If through your bad choices you become an environmental disaster, God cleans you up.

Both concepts, debt payoff and environmental cleanup, are in the same verse in Hebrews 10:22, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." One of the 10 illustrations packed into baptism is the washing away of sin; bodies washed with pure water. The sprinkling part comes from the illustration of the uncleanness ritual in the Law of Moses. The picture is of re-dedication, starting over as someone or something that is reserved for godly purposes. The big religion word is sanctification. When people of faith make bad choices, they are sprinkled with Jesus' blood; they are re-dedicated to godly purposes, just like when a priest was being made fit for duty.

One of the very important things Jesus did when He went home, in addition to offering His own blood in the real Temple in heaven, He cleaned up the place. In fact, I imagine that He cleaned up the place first and offered His own blood second – since it would make more sense to offer Himself in a clean Temple rather than a dirty one. Why would the Temple in heaven need cleaning? Because, until Jesus went home, Satan and his guys had free access to heaven. Heaven was not such a wonderful place. As recorded in Revelation 11, when Jesus went home, Michael and his angels started a war with Satan and his angels and drove them out, exiling them to earth for a short time, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, after which they were locked up in a bottomless pit until just before Judgment. But that's another story for another day. The point is that heaven was, shortly after Jesus went home, a real mess, an environmental disaster. After the bad guys were exiled, Jesus had to clean it up to make the real Temple in heaven a suitable dwelling for our spirits who are seated, right now, in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:6). We are a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9, Revelation 1:6). Jesus cleans us up so we can be proper priests in that real Temple in heaven, entering with boldness and confidence because the sprinkled blood of Jesus made us clean.

Why is this important to me? Each of us is an important and valuable part of the plan. We are the priests, intermediaries between the lost and God. We are leading, not struggling. Our shortsightedness, our occasional self-interest, our colossal blunders are the accumulated dirt of our travels on earth. So, when we report for duty as priests in that real Temple in heaven (which is every day), we get sprinkled – un-cleaned.

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But here is the big question. If you were tasked with picking someone for an incredibly important job in the kingdom of God, would you pick you? God did.

That's an important part of the good news: proof, pay-off, clean-up.

But do you feel insecure, less than adequate in this task of yours? If you have not lost touch with reality, probably so, which is what makes Jesus' next task after going home extremely important. He sent the Spirit to live in faithful people.

As Jesus related to His disciples in the Garden in the night in which He was betrayed in John 16:7, "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

One of the 10 illustrations wrapped up in baptism is receiving the Holy Spirit. So, what does that do for me? I do not have time to cover all the passages about that now, but here is a short list as a reminder. The Spirit that dwells in each Christian imparts, among other things, the ability to overcome me, a transformation of character into that of Jesus, translation and editing of our prayers, understanding of the will of God, the desire to do the will of God, the ability to love as God loves, and the sufficiency to do the job right. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14 – 16, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one, we are an aroma of death leading to death, and to the other an aroma of life leading to life. Who is sufficient for these things?" I can identify with that. Who is sufficient to be that priest in the real Temple in heaven? Paul answers the question a paragraph later, in 3:5, "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."

The story did not stop with the resurrection. Jesus did the final on-site prep work with his disciples for 40 days, then went home. But His job was not yet done. He then had to clean up heaven, finalize His own sacrifice by pouring out His own blood at the altar in heaven, the sacrificial meal of which we still continue until this "day" is done. Then He sent the Spirit to make us adequate for our tasks as priests. Proven, cleaned up, paid up, souped up – and one more thing before Jesus finally gets to sit down.

Jesus was put in charge of both heaven and earth. On top of that, we, the faithful, reign with him (Revelation 5:9 – 10, 20:4 – 6). We are not at the mercy of the events of this world; we control them.

Jesus made a lot of people mad by citing Daniel 7:13 – 14 and applying it to Himself. The New Testament writers picked up that theme. Altogether, it is cited 15 times:

"I was watching in the night visions, and behold One like the Son of Man, coming on the clouds of Heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed." And just so we don't get the idea that Jesus rules only in heaven, Psalm 2, quoted in Revelation 2, 12 and 19, the Messiah was predicted to rule all nations on earth with a rod of iron.

Notice that this is a description of Jesus returning to heaven, to the Ancient of Days, not of returning to earth. As 1 Timothy 3:16 puts it, "He was raised up in glory." What is "glory"? When Jesus went home, the citizens of heaven gave Him a victory parade (that's glory) – a parade of His character traits by which He had conquered sin and death. What does that mean, to conquer sin and death? He did not just show that He could beat them, He utterly broke them. The deceitfulness of sin, as Hebrews 3:13 puts it, lures people, makes empty promises of

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happiness, and traps people into becoming slaves to it. Yes, Jesus demonstrated how to resist sin, but resisting is not defeating. If Jesus only resisted, He would be like a leader of a resistance movement, poking at the powers that be, evading capture, but in charge of nothing. No, Jesus crushed forever the control sin has over people. The problem is that most people don't know that the war is over and that they have been set free from a cruel and oppressive government.

Big claim. But is it real? Does it work? The claim is that we are free. Free from our past debt to justice. Free from the fear of death. Free from slavery to sin. We have liberty. I would have done liberty this morning, but I could not cut it below 45 minutes.

The minor discomforts of this world are just what we do to get our job done. I think we can all agree that we do things that we would rather not in order to obtain what we want. Given the choice, I would not go to work tomorrow. But I will. Caring about someone else can be difficult, but we do it. Younger people endure physical exercise for the gain they obtain at game time. We, the faithful, do what we do not to go to heaven, but for the joy it brings. If you take all the joy and rejoice passages in the New Testament and put them together, you will see that our joy comes from the successes of faith – either our own or through observing the successes of others. We accept the inconveniences of life on earth because of the joy we derive in this life. – through the successes of faith – through the work of the Spirit that happens through us.

Jesus proved who He is and went home, where he cleaned up our home (where our spirits live now), completed His sacrifice to buy up our debt, sent the Spirit as a down payment on eternity, through whom we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, accepted the top spot in the eternal kingdom, which He shares with us – and then, finally, He sat down. The importance of sitting down is that His job was finished. He is not reacting to what we do, trying to keep up with our messes. He set everything in its place, put the now-empowered us in charge, and sat down to let His system work.

That's a broad overview of the rest of the story. If that sounds like something you would want to surrender to, to become a slave of, please let your wishes be known as we stand and sing.