

June 8th, 2008

“The Last Year of the Life of Christ, Part 3”

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Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36

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Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

In our last lesson, we discussed Jesus’ response to our covetousness. In **Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-9:1, Luke 9:22-27**

Then Jesus called everyone to join His disciples, and He said to them all, “If anyone chooses to come after Me, he must put his own desires to one side, pick up his cross every day, and follow Me. Whoever intends to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for My sake and for that of the good news will save it—he will find it.

“What good is it if someone obtains the whole world but destroys himself or loses his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

While salvation is a function of belief, mere intellectual assent to historical facts about the life of Christ is not enough to save those of us whom the Lord chooses to present Himself while we have the opportunity to live for Him. I have read, and I believe that Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth President of the United States, serving from 1850 to 1853. That information,

while true, has no effect upon any decision that I would make. The fact that you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on that first Easter Sunday morning could be, for you, a similar kind of historical information. You could believe it, while it has no relevance to your life and no effect upon your decision making.

Jesus tells us we need to do more in order to be saved than just believe the facts; we must put our own desires to one side, just as wives do when they obey their husbands, pick up the cross, just as husbands do when they love their wives and give themselves for them, and then follow the instructions and commandments of Jesus Christ that He gives us in, **John 13:34-35:**

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus goes on to tell His disciples, in **Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-9:1, Luke 9:22-27**

“If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and that of the Father and the holy angels. At that time He will reward each person according to what he has done.

It is intuitively obvious that anyone that wants to be a disciple of Jesus Christ must acknowledge His historicity, that is, the historical truth of the Biblical accounts of His life, death, burial and resurrection from the dead. Actually, the historical evidence for these events is overwhelming, and the opponents of the Gospel cannot refute the truth of the Word of God; they can only assert that the Bible is false.

There are no actual grounds upon which to make the assertion that the Bible contains historically false information, so skeptics can only offer theories as to how the records of history that depend upon the truth of the Bible have come to exist.

B. F. Westcott, the Bishop of Durham, England from 1890 until his death in 1901, and a highly decorated professor of divinity at Cambridge University, wrote in his book, the Gospel of the Resurrection:

“Indeed, taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ. Nothing but antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it.”

Whatever theory that skeptics offer to demonstrate that the Bible is not historically accurate is just exactly that, a theory. A theory is, in reality, simply a more scholarly sounding name for an opinion, and although people hold opinions that are not based upon factual data, we generally do not give any credence to those opinions once facts that prove the opinion wrong become available.

On May 29th, I held the opinion that the Detroit Pistons would beat the Boston Celtics in game 6 at the Palace at Auburn Hills and force a game 7 in Boston, but the final score of game 6 on May 30th rendered my opinion invalid and irrelevant. The evidence for the historical accuracy of the Bible is much like the evidence for the historical accuracy of the fact that Boston won game 6 against Detroit. Biblical history has been put to the test and validated by both history and archaeology.

Two fascinating discoveries illuminate the death of Christ and, to some degree, his resurrection.

The first is an unusual decree. A slab of stone was discovered by archaeologists in Nazareth in 1878, inscribed with a decree from Emperor Claudius, who is mentioned in Acts 11 and 18, and who reigned from 41 to 54 AD. The stone said that no graves should be disturbed or bodies extracted or moved. This type of decree is not uncommon, but the startling fact is that this stone said, “The offender shall be sentenced to capital punishment on the charge of violation of a sepulcher.” Precedent indicates that a fine would be in order for disturbing a grave, but a death sentence seems bit extreme. A likely explanation is that Claudius, having heard of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and Jesus’ empty tomb while investigating the riots of 49 A.D., recorded in Acts 17, decided not to let any such report surface again. This would make sense in light of the Jewish argument, given in Matthew 28:11-15, that Jesus’ body had been stolen. This is early testimony to the strong and persistent belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

The second discovery is the body of another crucifixion victim. To refute the Gospel accounts, skeptical scholars asserted that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion were untrue because, according to their theory, the Romans did not use nails to crucify their victims, but simply tied them to the cross. In 1968, shortly after this theory was put forward, an ancient burial site containing about thirty-five bodies was uncovered by archaeologists in Jerusalem. It was determined that most of these had suffered violent deaths in the Jewish uprising against Rome in 70 A.D. One of these was a man named Yohanan Ben Ha’galgol. He was about twenty-four to twenty-eight years old, had a cleft palate, and a seven-inch nail was still driven through both his feet. The feet had been turned outward so that the square nail could be hammered through at the heel, just inside the Achilles tendon. This would have bowed the legs outward as well so that they could not have been used for support on the cross. The nail had gone through a wedge of acacia wood, then through the heels, then into an olive wood beam. There was also evidence that similar spikes had been put between the two bones of each lower arm. These had caused the upper bones to be worn smooth as the victim repeatedly raised and lowered himself to breathe (breathing is restricted with the arms raised). Crucifixion victims had to lift themselves to free the chest muscles and, when they grew too weak to do so, died by suffocation.

Yohanan’s legs were crushed by a blow, consistent with the common use of the Roman crucifragium as described in John 19:31–32. Each of these details confirms the New Testament description of crucifixion.

These examples reveal the extent to which archaeology has confirmed the truth of the Scriptures. There are many more available. Archaeologist Nelson Glueck has boldly asserted that:

“It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever [contradicted] a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”

Josh McDowell, a noted Christian historical researcher, has written the seminal volume on this issue, entitled Evidence that Demands a Verdict. A group of Christian students asked their professor, the head of the history department of a large university, to read McDowell and to give them his opinion.

Several months later, one of the students returned to the professor's office to inquire about the book. The professor replied that he had finished it, that it contained some of the most persuasive arguments in favor of Christianity that he had read and that he didn't know how anyone could refute them. At this point he added, "However, I do not accept Mr. McDowell's conclusions."

The student, slightly baffled, asked, "Why?"

The head of the history department answered, "Because of my worldview!"

The professor's "worldview" is nothing more than his opinion about God and the world. He chooses to not believe in God's supernatural ability to interact with us in the world. His opinion brings him to the conclusion that there is no God and that Jesus Christ did not actually rise from the dead, although the evidence is clearly to the contrary. The professor rejected the history of the Christ in spite of the evidence, not because of any evidence to the contrary. He may also still think that the Pistons are going to play game 7 and win it.

You will find this type of thinking wherever you go.

Those that do not believe in God do not have a reason to disbelieve; they have simply made the choice to not believe in spite of the abundant evidence that God has interacted with our world, rather than because of any evidence to the contrary.

Skeptical administrators, professors and teachers in high schools and colleges have no evidence to support their skepticism, so they assert their assumptions like a battering ram. They make unfounded statements like, "no thinking person could ever believe in Christianity" although there are scores of archaeologists, professors, researchers and theologians that have studied the history of Christianity and then successfully researched it, digging up the Palestine and gathering artifacts from the first century to obtain evidence that the New Testament, including the episode of the resurrection, is literally true.

Skeptical teachers use their academic authority and mix their ignorant statements with defensiveness, sarcasm, bullying and ridicule to intimidate Christian students and to maintain their self-delusion of superiority, asserting that to not believe in God is an intellectually superior position. But Jesus Christ charges us to not be taken in by the appeals of skeptics to their own authority, but rather to examine the solid evidence that history gives us to prove that Jesus Christ is Lord, and is in fact the Son of God. He says, in **Matthew 16:21-28, Mark 8:31-9:1, Luke 9:22-27:**

"If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and that of the Father and the holy angels. At that time He will reward each person according to what he has done.

Jesus then goes on to say:

"I tell you the truth, some of you standing here will not die before you see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom—the kingdom of God coming with power."

After Jesus' statement, our text, **Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36**, tells us:

Six days later Jesus took Peter and James and his brother John up on a high mountain so they could pray by themselves. As He was praying, His appearance changed and He was transformed before their eyes. His face grew as bright as the sun, and His clothing began to shine a brilliant white, like snow, whiter than any washing could bleach

them—a radiant white, like light itself. Suddenly two men—Moses and Elijah—appeared before them. They also were shining, and they talked [with Jesus] about His coming departure which would occur in Jerusalem.

Peter and his companions had been nodding off to sleep, but now were wide awake as they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. As the men began to leave Him, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here. If You want us to, we could make three shelters—one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying, for they were all so frightened.)

Even as he was speaking, a bright cloud appeared overhead and covered them. They grew more frightened as the cloud enveloped them. Suddenly a Voice from the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I delight. Listen to Him!”

This was a remarkable occurrence. Jesus took his three most trusted lieutenants up on the mountain and revealed His true self to them. Jesus told them that they would see Him coming in power and into His Kingdom, and, up on the mountain, Jesus transformed from his earthly state back to His Heavenly state. Jesus was radiant, brighter than light, and in the company of Moses and Elijah, arguably the two most influential figures in the history of Judaism.

To the Jews, Moses was synonymous with the Old Covenant, which the Lord gave through him. The Old Testament was referred to by the Jews as “Moses and the Prophets”, and Old Testament law was called the Law of Moses. Reared in the court of Pharaoh, exiled to the fields and flocks of Midian to learn humility and become a servant of God, and then chosen by the Lord to lead His people out of bondage, to give them His law and to lead them to the borders of the Promised Land, Moses was, arguably the greatest leader in human history. Moses led an estimated two million rebellious, faithless people out of Egypt and into the wilderness, where they wandered together for forty years while God raised up a more obedient and manageable generation. Before the people of Israel had formal prophets, Moses was a prophet, bringing God’s word to the Jews. Before they had formal priests, Moses was a priest, mediating between God and the Jews. And before they had formal kings, Moses was a king, ruling the Jews in God’s name.

Perhaps the only other person in the Old Testament who could have stood with Moses was Elijah. Moses was the great law giver, and Elijah was the great defender of the law. This prophet was zeal personified, a godly man of unmatched courage and boldness, overcoming any fear that he might have had in the face of the idol worshipping King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Elijah had a heart for God, he walked with God, and, more than any other Old Testament saint, was the instrument of God’s miracle-working power. He was the preeminent prophet of God, and to the Jews the most romantic Old Testament personality. Elijah was one of the two people that God allowed to not see death, but to leave the earth most extraordinarily in the presence of his successor, Elisha, as **2Kings 2:8-14** records:

8 Now Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up, and struck the water; and it was divided this way and that, so that Elijah and Elisha crossed over on dry ground.

9 And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, “Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?” Elisha said, “Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me.”

10 So Elijah said, “You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am

taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so.”

11 Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw it, and he cried out, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” So he saw him no more. And Elisha took hold of his own clothes and tore them into two pieces.

13 He also took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood by the bank of the Jordan.

14 Then he took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, and said, “Where is the LORD God of Elijah?” And when he also had struck the water, it was divided this way and that; and Elisha crossed over.

Along with Jesus, Moses and Elijah, the fourth and most impressive display in the Transfiguration was the appearance of God Himself in the cloud. God spoke even as He had when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, telling the disciples to listen to the teachings of Jesus Christ, as they would be the ones to testify for Jesus after His death, burial and resurrection.

The disciples were terrified, as anyone would be. To actually hear the voice of God and to be surrounded, encompassed, as it were, by God’s glory, would be a terrifying experience for people like ourselves, who are sinners, and not fit to stand in the presence of a Holy God. Isaiah described having this type of humbling, terrifying experience when God brought him up to the divine throne room and interviewed him for the job of prophet. **Isaiah 6:1-5** records:

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.

2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

3 And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!”

4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.”

Peter, James and John felt as Isaiah did in the throne room. They were frightened by seeing the transformed Jesus with Moses and Elijah, but terrified by being with God. They fell on their faces until they no longer heard the voice of God reverberating on the mountain. When the silence came upon them, they quickly looked up and saw Jesus, telling them to get up and not be afraid. Then, the text says:

As they made their way down the mountain, Jesus told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept quiet, telling no one at the time what they had seen and what Jesus had said. Among themselves they discussed what “rising from the dead” might mean.

I spoke earlier about the objective historical proof of the reality of the resurrection provided by the writings of those who were there and were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ majesty, and

about the physical artifacts of the times that have been excavated by the archaeologists researching the gospels. However, Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is not really the reason that the disciples believed in Him. John writes, in **1John 1:1-4**:

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—

2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—

3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

John was on the mountain and saw the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. After Jesus' crucifixion, when the women came with the report of Jesus' empty tomb, John, with Peter, ran to the tomb, looked in, and then entered, finding the grave clothes but not the body of Jesus Christ. Moses and Elijah did great miracles even as Jesus did, but Jesus Christ, uniquely, rose physically from the dead.

When Jesus told them about His resurrection as they were coming down the mountain, they understood the words that Jesus spoke, but they did not have the intellectual frame of reference to understand that which Jesus was to do and the glory that was to come of His sacrifice. The disciples knew the Messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 9:6-7**, which says:

6 For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

But the disciples could not figure how the Messiah's kingdom could avoid coming to an end if the Messiah died before His Kingdom started? To the disciples, by definition, the death of a king would mean the end of his kingdom. The disciples, although they loved Jesus and knew Him as the Messiah, lacked the understanding of the concept that Jesus' Kingdom would not begin until Jesus actually fulfilled His prophecy and rose from the dead.

So, when the Jews came to take Jesus, Peter fought with the Jews until Jesus rebuked him. The rest of the disciples, saving John, forsook Jesus and fled. Peter followed the arrested Jesus to see the twelve legions of angels to which Jesus referred come to rescue Him. When the angels did not show up and Peter saw Jesus bound, beaten, tried, and then sentenced to death, Peter jumped ship and denied even knowing Jesus. John was allowed to stay with Jesus without being molested by the guards and soldiers because John was known to the High Priest, but I'm sure that had John been challenged as were Peter and the disciples, He would have fled also.

That which Jesus prophesied about Himself was counterintuitive to everything that His disciples thought, and so they could not believe it. The disciples, however, were ultimately convinced, not by prophecy or by doctrine, but by their own personal experience, which they relate to us in the Scriptures. We previously read John's assertion of his own eyewitness testimony. Peter, similarly, tells us in **2Peter 1:16-21**:

16 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.

17 For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

18 And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

19 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts;

20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,

21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Do you want a personal experience with God, even as the apostles had? The same God that came down to the mountain in our text is still in heaven today, and He will come to meet you if you prepare to meet Him. **2Chronicles 7:14** tells us:

14 if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Jesus tells us that our attitude should be one of humility rather than covetousness.

Philippians 2:3-13 tells us:

3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,

6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,

7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

9 Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,

10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth,

11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

2Chronicles 7 and **Philippians 2** tells us that prayer and humility are the keys to a relationship with God. How can we manifest this humility and work out our own salvation?

Ephesians 5:22, 24, 25, 28 tells us:

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,

28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.

1Peter 3:7 tells us:

7 Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

Ephesians tells us that our marital relationships are the primary places in which we can develop humility and Peter tells us that our marriages can keep our prayer life fruitful. In marriage we become one, even as the Godhead is one, and we can manifest the attributes that God wants us to develop to have a relationship with Him. If we want to have that relationship with God, we should certainly begin by having a godly relationship with the person with whom we sleep in the bed, because, as **1John 4:20-21**:

20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

Jesus went up on the mountain and took His disciples with Him to show them the glory of God. The Holy Spirit will show us that same glory if we choose to pray, to humble ourselves, to love one another, and to keep His commandments. Let us resolve to follow the instructions of Jesus to prepare for our trip up the mountain.

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