

PROPHECY WAS FULFILLED

ACTS 2:22-36, 13:30-37

We're focusing on the resurrection of Jesus. Kids have a way of providing a fresh insight on well-known parts of life. One sleepy Sunday afternoon a dad and his five-year-old son drove past a cemetery together. Noticing a large pile of dirt beside a newly excavated grave, the boy pointed and said: "Look, Daddy, one got out!" His dad laughed, but now, every time that man passes a graveyard, he's reminded of the One who got out. Jesus is the One who got out. And because He got out, all of us who know and love Him will get out, too.

We're about a month away from Easter Sunday, so last Sunday we began a new message series: "Why The Resurrection Is The Great Essential." Well-known pastor and author, Tim Keller, summed it up well. "If Jesus rose from the dead, you have to accept all he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about anything he said? If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything." An exaggeration? Not according to the Bible which says, "If Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless.... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins." (1 Cor. 15:14, 17 NLT)

Why doesn't the resurrection get the emphasis even among Christians it so richly deserves? We mulled that over a bit last week. Perhaps it's because the prominence of Jesus' death on the cross has unintentionally eclipsed the importance of His resurrection. But if Jesus had stayed in the tomb, everything He did at the cross would have no value for anyone. The Christian faith would be a sham, a colossal waste of time, and the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on humanity. Maybe de-emphasizing the resurrection is a sneaky satanic strategy. Don't deny it, just get everyone to minimize its importance. Most Christians assume Jesus rose from the dead, but fewer of us really appreciate and understand why it's so central, so important, and so essential to all we believe about God, salvation, life, death, everything. So, we're taking seven Sundays to consider why Jesus' resurrection is so essential.

Today, I want us to focus on the many prophecies that were fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead. Last week we read what Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in the Greek city of Corinth, "I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said." (1 Cor. 15:3-4 NLT) We know the Old Testament predicted Jesus' miraculous birth and His death for our sins. But did it also predict Jesus' resurrection? What Scriptures might Paul have been alluding to in those verses? The very first Christians strongly believed that Jesus' resurrection was predicted beforehand in both the Old Testament and by Jesus. Because it faithfully fulfilled prophecy, the resurrection underlines yet again that it's the great essential to our faith. Let's try to answer three questions today.

HOW DOES THE OLD TESTAMENT POINT TO JESUS' RESURRECTION?

Most of the time, Old Testament prophecies were not blatant, in your face, statements about who Jesus would be and what He would do. You won't find a verse that says, "The Messiah will rise from the dead three days after He dies on a cross." Old Testament prophecy about Jesus is more subtle and veiled. Old Testament believers didn't expect someone rising from the dead; they just knew God was sending someone very special into the world. This person came to be known among Jewish people as the Messiah (the Hebrew word) or the Christ (the Greek word). It means an anointed person – a very special person sent from God. But no one knew His exact identity until after Jesus rose from the dead and went back to Heaven. That's when the very first Christians – all of them Jewish and well acquainted with the Old Testament – started to put two and two together. In fact, it was Jesus' bodily, literal, physical resurrection that convinced them beyond any shadow of a doubt that Jesus was the promised Messiah – the Christ. After that great event, the Holy Spirit started to show them places in the Old Testament that pointed to Jesus' resurrection. What did they find there?

First, the Messiah would win a decisive victory over the devil. That's found in the first book of the Bible. In the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned, God pronounced judgment upon the devil who had taken the form of a snake. "And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." (Gen. 3:15 NLT) God Himself predicted that the Messiah and Satan would engage in a great conflict. Satan would injure the Messiah – he would bite his heel, so to speak - but it would not be a fatal or final injury. The Messiah, however, would give a decisive, crushing blow to Satan by striking his head. What was God referring to? It only makes sense in light of the cross and the resurrection. Yes, Satan injured Jesus severely through all the suffering He endured on the cross, but when Jesus rose from the dead, it was the killing blow to evil and sin. No, the devil is not dead yet, to be sure, but his future doom was made certain when Jesus got up on Easter Day. That was the single worst day Satan has ever experienced – to be eclipsed only by the day God puts him out of his misery forever.

Second, the Messiah would die by His Father's hand but be raised back to life. That was pictured by Abraham's almost sacrifice of his son, Isaac, in Genesis 22. That whole scene was a precursor of what was going to happen to Jesus. Like Abraham, God was prepared to sacrifice His own Son. Unlike Abraham, there was no last second reprieve for His Son as there was for Isaac. God did not spare Jesus, but allowed Him to die to pay the penalty for our sin. Make no mistake about it. Yes, evil men were guilty of putting Jesus to death, but it would never have happened if God Himself had not planned for Jesus to die for our sins. The first Christians recognized in the story of Abraham and Isaac the story of God the Father and God the Son. Abraham and Isaac's experience pointed straight to Jesus. The New Testament says, "Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead." (Heb. 11:19 NLT)

Third, the Messiah would die, but his body would never decay. How could that be? Because He was raised from the dead before His body started to decompose. It was in Psalm 16:8-11 that the first Christians saw that prophesied. Let's see that in two places

today. Both Peter and Paul were making the same point by quoting this psalm. What was their point? King David wrote Psalm 16. It sounded like David was talking about his own death. Somehow God would not allow his body to decay in the grave. But both Peter and Paul observed David most certainly did die, his body did decay, and everyone knew where he'd been buried. The only way what David wrote a 1,000 years before Jesus made any sense was to see it as a prophecy about the future Messiah. "For you will not leave my soul among the dead or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave." (Acts 2:27 [Ps. 16:10] NLT) God did not abandon Jesus. Natural decay never had a chance to do its work on Jesus' body. Why not? Because God raised the Holy One - the Son of God - back to life on Easter Day.

Fourth, the Messiah would be elevated to a place of eternal honor in God's presence. In the same passage we read in Acts 2, Peter quoted from another of King David's psalms – Psalm 110. "God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand.... For David himself never ascended into heaven, yet he said, "The LORD said to my Lord, sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet (Ps. 110:1)."" (Acts 2:32-35 NLT) Peter saw in that rather mysterious, cryptic comment a reference to Jesus. After all, David never ascended to Heaven in person or took his seat at God's right hand; therefore, these words could only be fulfilled in someone else - the Messiah - who had now been revealed as Jesus. The second "Lord" was a reference to David's physical descendant, the Messiah. God the Father invited this Lord to sit at His right hand until all of their enemies were defeated.

Fifth, the Messiah would be able to see the amazing results of His own suffering. We find that prophecy in Isaiah. "But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him and cause him grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins." (Is. 53:10-11 NLT) This prophecy only makes sense if there was a resurrection. Only if the Messiah is alive and well can He then see all that was accomplished by His own anguish and be satisfied. Only if Jesus was resurrected, can many now be counted righteous and the penalty of their sins paid in full. There are other Old Testament passages we could dissect if we had the time, but by now we should see and understand why Jesus wasn't just an unusual preacher from the town of Nazareth who died and rose again, but the fulfillment of all these Old Testament promises and prophecies. Here's a second question.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT HIS OWN RESURRECTION?

Jesus was and is a prophet. In addition to being our Savior and our Lord, we believe Jesus predicted future events about Himself accurately. We also believe He has made predictions about the future that haven't been fulfilled yet, specifically about His second coming and what will happen before and after that event. Did Jesus predict His own resurrection? Absolutely. It wasn't a subject He spoke about at every occasion, but what He said was clear and unequivocal.

Jesus predicted His resurrection in hidden ways. On one occasion, He got into one of His frequent arguments with the Jewish religious leaders and He said the following. “‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ‘What!’ they exclaimed. ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?’ But when Jesus said ‘this temple,’ he meant his own body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he had said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said.” (Jo. 2:19-22 NLT)

As Jesus studied the Old Testament, He saw pictures or precursors of what would happen to Him in its stories. For example, in the story of Jonah. He said, “‘For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.’” (Mt. 12:40 NLT) Like the story of Abraham and Isaac story, there are both similarities and differences in what happened to Jonah and to Jesus. Like Jonah, Jesus was sent to a sinful, lost world headed for destruction. Unlike Jonah, Jesus obeyed willingly and immediately putting the needs of a lost world above Himself. You’ll remember Jonah was more than a little reluctant to do God’s will. Like Jonah, Jesus did not remain dead or as good as dead, but was raised to life and given a task to accomplish. Unlike Jonah, Jesus rejoiced when His message of salvation led to the repentance of many. Jonah was a grump.

Jesus also predicated His resurrection blatantly. Where the Old Testament was subtle, Jesus could be completely straightforward about what was going to happen to Him. For example, the Bible says, “‘From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.’” (Mt. 16:21 NLT) After the event we now refer to as the Transfiguration when Jesus appeared to three of His disciples alongside heavenly appearances of Moses and Elijah, we’re told, “‘As they went back down the mountain, he told them not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept it to themselves, but they often asked each other what he meant by ‘rising from the dead.’” (Mk. 9:9-10 NLT) There’s clear evidence Jesus’ followers did not expect or anticipate an actual, literal resurrection any more than any of us would today. Jesus even predicted His resurrection on the night of His betrayal and arrest. “‘But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.’” (Mt. 26:32 NLT)

Jesus was and is a prophet. His death and resurrection were predicted in the Old Testament and by Himself. After He rose from the dead, He wanted to make sure His followers understood that it was all a fulfillment of God’s plan and purpose. Do you remember what He said to two of His followers on that very first Easter Sunday as they walked together toward the town of Emmaus? “‘You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?’ Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Lk. 24:25-27 NLT) A final question.

WHAT DOES FULFILLED PROPHECY TELL US ABOUT GOD?

Now, at this point you might be saying to yourself, “Rick, this is all well and good, but so what? How does any of this affect my life today? What difference does it make?” I can think of at least two reasons why it makes all the difference in the world to you and me today. First, fulfilled prophecy reveals God has a plan that will prevail. Clearly, the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection were not some haphazard, random events. These were in the mind of God even before He created the world. Scripture makes this amazing claim, “Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.” (Eph. 1:4 NLT) Both events were a necessary part of God showing us His love and making it possible for us to have a restored relationship with Him. Yes, Jesus’ torture before the cross and His terrible suffering on the cross were criminal acts perpetrated by evil men, but they were already in the mind of God before He created planet Earth. So was the resurrection of Jesus.

I believe that fact should provide great comfort to you and me. Why? God doesn’t do anything randomly or haphazardly. I wonder if God can ever truly be spontaneous in the way we are sometimes. Everything He does and does not do is the outworking of some great plan and purpose that we only get glimpses of now and again. All of that means that God has a plan and a purpose for your life and mine, too. I think of one of my favorite Scriptures, “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’” (Jer. 29:11 NLT) You already know God allows things to come into our lives that are painful, difficult, and troubling. Some of God’s plan for our lives take twists and turns that are impossible to understand or feel good about when they happen. But what I hear in that verse is that God has a good plan for you and for me and it will ultimately prevail. Maybe not today or tomorrow. Maybe not even in this life. But against the backdrop of eternity, God’s plans always result in His glory and our good. Another Scripture drives that truth home. “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Rom. 8:28 NLT)

When 13-year-old Lauren Blakemore was newly diagnosed with cancer, she heard a sermon at her church and she knew God wanted her to do mission work with cancer kids. She said, “I can give them hope by telling my story.” Lauren’s cancer was rare and aggressive. There are only about 450 cases diagnosed every year. After 14 rounds of chemotherapy and 25 radiation treatments, Lauren’s recovery is considered a miracle. Throughout her battle, Lauren found comfort from a gift she had received before she was born—a blanket. A neighbor named Mildred made a bright, multi-colored quilt as a baby gift for Lauren. This blanket which Lauren called “Miss Mildred” was always Lauren’s favorite. She snuggled in it through childhood and then through the nausea, fatigue, and sleepless nights that came with battling cancer. After Lauren’s dad visited a children’s cancer ward in India, he returned home to tell her about the kids. Immediately, Lauren began to raise money by speaking at Rotary Club meetings and schools. She wanted every child to have a special blanket because, she said, “chemotherapy makes you cold all the time.” As it turned out, each child’s bed in the

cancer ward is now warmed by a "Miss Mildred" blanket. "When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I knew God had a plan for my life," Lauren said. "This is part of that plan."

Secondly, fulfilled prophecy about the resurrection reveals Jesus is Lord. When Peter came to the end of his awesome sermon on the Day of Pentecost which we read a part of today there in Acts 2, he said, "So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!" (Acts 2:36 NLT) Not only was Jesus the Messiah, but He was now fully revealed as the Lord. That title was significant for two reasons. To a Jew, Lord was the title or name given to God Himself. Peter recognized and proclaimed Jesus was God in human flesh. To a non-Jew, Lord was a title reserved for the Roman Caesar alone. He was the only man who was recognized as lord. But Peter was saying there's really only one man who deserves the title Lord. His name was and is Jesus. And if anything proved and pointed to the Lordship of Jesus, it was - and still is - the fact that on the very first Easter Day, Jesus walked out of the tomb alive and well. Jesus is Lord.

A pastor was visiting Italy. There he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity. But apparently he believed in taking precautions just in case. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead just in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had message put on the slab that said, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it." Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave, because a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the man's grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The pastor looked at it and thought, "If an acorn, which has the power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that immense weight and size, what can the power of Jesus' resurrection power do in a person's life?"

Jesus' resurrection changed everything. Even though evil men put Jesus to death, it wasn't possible for death to keep the Lord of the universe in its final grip. Death could not rule over, master, prevail over, hold fast, control, or retain Jesus the Lord. For the very first Christians, Jesus' resurrection changed broken, defeated, and bewildered men and women into champions for Jesus and unstoppable proclaimers of the good news about Him. The resurrection changed the cross and the death of Jesus from a tragedy into a triumph. That's why for Christians all over the world, every Sunday is Resurrection Sunday. It's created the opportunity for spiritual transformation. It has the power to change living in fear to living in love, living in despair to living in joy, living in guilty condemnation to living in continual forgiveness, and living in the dread of death to living in the certain hope of eternal life. The power of the resurrection can remove any immovable slab in your life and mine – guilt, fear, bitterness, or pride. The resurrection of Jesus is the great essential.