

Times of Refreshing

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Acts 3:12-21 NASB

But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, “Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered up, and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

“And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.”

*You put your right foot in,
You put your right foot out.
You put your right foot in
And you shake it all about.
You do the Hokey Pokey
And you turn yourself around.
That's what it's all about!*

Asking, “What is it *really* all about?” is a pretty good idea. But I suppose most people never bother to ask that question. Or, if they do, their answer is: “It’s all about *me* and what makes me happy.” Sadly, that answer is really no better than the answer given by the little children’s song. If it isn’t all about something greater than *me*, then it might just as well be all about the Hokey Pokey. Why would one answer be better than another? If you don’t have God in your life, then maybe it *is* all about the Hokey Pokey.

So we need to step back from life’s routine and ask, “What is it *really* all about?” This can happen in many areas. Take sickness or disease, for example — all of us have had to deal with that. If our doctor just treats the symptoms with some prescription or procedure, then we’ve never gotten down to the *cause* of the symptoms. What are the symptoms we experience *all about*? If part of our body is inflamed, the doctor treats the inflammation. But what’s the *source* of the inflammation? If we can discover that, instead of just playing Hokey Pokey with our symptoms, we have a better prospect of getting well.

And when it comes to our Christian faith — the faith laid out in the New Testament — we don’t want to play Hokey Pokey with that, either. We need to ask the same question: What’s it really all about? So hang onto your hats — if you have a hat — because in the next few minutes we’re going to get a heavy dose of biblical theology.

Why did Jesus come, and what did his coming do for us? I think many Christians are content with a superficial answer: Our faith in Christ is so that we can escape hell and go to heaven. It’s interesting that the New Testament never puts it exactly like that. The Bible tells us explicitly why Jesus came, in 1 John 3:8: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (NASB). And Jesus himself tells us why he came: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Put these two verses together, and we could say that Jesus lived, and died, and rose again in order to *give people back the life God created for them, but which the devil has stolen*.

In other words, Jesus came to *restore* something that has been lost, corrupted and disfigured. That’s the Bible story: When God made the world he “saw that it was good” — six times in Genesis, chapter 1. But something happened to ruin that goodness. Mankind was living in Eden, the garden of God, centered around the tree of life. But people decided they didn’t need God, because they could be like God

themselves. In other words, mankind said, “It’s all about me.” So God sent one Man who was willing to give a different answer to the question, “What’s it all about?” even if it took him to the cross — a man who “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7), a man who said, “It’s not about me, it’s about God.” And when Jesus did this, God began to restore his lost creation, so that — as Paul says — when anyone joins up with Christ, they’re in the new creation; “the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

I think that explains why Peter said what he said after that lame man was healed at the Temple, in one of the earliest Christian messages recorded in the New Testament: “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets” (Acts 3:19-21 NASB).

So we’re speaking today about *restoration*, because when it comes to the New Testament *that’s what it’s really all about*. It’s not about our being whisked off to some other ethereal realm; it’s about God bringing *this creation* back in line with his purpose from the beginning. The Greek word used here, *apokatastasis*, is translated different ways: restitution, reconstitution, establishing. The idea is to take something that has been ruined and restore it to what it’s supposed to be.

When you look at the New Testament this way you can see this message all over the place. Consider Paul’s words in Romans 8:

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our [body]. For in this hope we were saved (Romans 8:21-24 NIV).

Human disobedience brought decay and corruption into God’s creation, but the Spirit of Christ is undoing the “works of the devil” and restoring what has been lost.

Or let’s take another passage, from 1 Corinthians 15:

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one (1 Corinthians 15:22-26, 28 RSV).

Here we get a picture of how God is restoring his creation: through the resurrection from the dead. Death, and all those worldly authorities that control people by threatening some kind of death, are the enemies of God’s good creation. So it’s by overcoming death that God will reconstitute what he has made. It’s a two-stage process: Jesus has already been raised, and if we know him we share in his resurrection already. But when God brings the process to completion *all of his people* will be raised in a new body. In the resurrection God will be “everything to everyone,” or as some translations say, God will be the “all in all.” Maybe that’s another way of saying what it’s all about: it’s *all about God*, after all.

And notice where God’s people are going to live with him then: not in heaven, but in what the apostle John calls a “new Jerusalem.” He writes about that in chapter 21 of the Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21:1-3 RSV).

He goes on to describe this “new Jerusalem,” and part of his description goes like this:

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

Some people think this is a description of heaven, but John says it all *comes down from heaven*. The picture he paints includes the “tree of life” from the garden of Eden. So the Bible begins with a beautiful creation and ends with a promise of restoration: the restoration of the earth to what God originally made it to be, where people are living in free and open and loving fellowship with their Creator. That sure seems consistent with what Peter was preaching about the “times of refreshing” that come from the presence of the Lord when Christ brings about “the restoration of all things.”

Okay, that’s a look at restoration from the perspective of biblical theology. We might call it the *cosmic perspective* because it has to do with what God is doing to restore the cosmos, his creation. Now let’s come up for air and look at restoration from an *ecclesiastical perspective*. What about restoration in the church? That’s an issue Union Church is dealing with. Dr. John Kimball from the CCCC office has been here twice, speaking about *church redevelopment for effective ministry*. When Pastor David and Sylvia began their work here, and started to get involved in the community, we all saw right away that there was a renewed possibility for outreach in and around Monroe Center. But we also understand that something more needs to happen in this fellowship for redevelopment to occur. I believe we’re talking about *restoration* here, and I offer just a few thoughts about that.

My grandfather, Don M. Leonard, enjoyed building furniture; he made a grandfather clock, a china cabinet and sideboard, and several other items including an oak table about the size of an office desktop, stained in dark walnut. My parents inherited the furniture, and it was in our home when I was growing up. At one point they decided they didn’t like the table with the dark finish, so they “antiqued” it in a much lighter color, with fake wood graining and all. We have the table now, and for years I’ve been promising myself I would restore it to the way my grandfather made it. A few weeks ago I finally tackled the job. And in order to restore it I had to strip off the antiquing till the original wood grain was visible, brought out by the new finish I put on it.

That’s sort of a picture of church redevelopment. Redevelopment doesn’t mean going back to some idealized previous state of existence — not what this church was when it was established in 1915, or not even what it was at the 75th anniversary in 1990. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Redevelopment means going back to the original purpose and intent of the Maker, so that we can see the “wood grain” — so to speak — that tells people that this is God’s creation, not ours. So church redevelopment doesn’t mean we try to paint over with another layer of programs or activity so that the church *looks like* it has gone back to some earlier phase of authentic ministry. We have to strip away those outer layers that have been applied through the years and ask, “What’s the church really all about as God moves his plan forward into tomorrow?”

I’m sure that’s why Dr. Kimball has been stressing that church redevelopment must involve *kingdom growth* — not just diverting people from other ministries so that these walls can start to bulge, but helping hurting people who are living pointless lives to find Jesus Christ so they can enter into the new creation he brings. The Lord knows there are enough people around Monroe Center and Davis Junction who need the life they can know in Jesus.

The Bible is divided into two parts: the problem, and the solution. The problem is laid out in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and the problem is that people forgot about God. The solution begins in Genesis 12, when God calls Abraham to be the father of a new people that will be a blessing to all nations. That’s why, when the apostle Paul, in Romans, talks about who really belongs to the people of God, he goes back to Abraham and his obedience to God’s call. Jesus said, “Because wickedness is multiplied, most men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved. And *this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations*; and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:12-14).

We can’t sit around waiting for the Lord to do what he’s put *us* here to do. For instance, are we listening to sermons each week hoping the preacher will entertain us when he fills that slot in the order of service? Or do we listen expecting to hear a word from the Lord that will impact and redirect our life

into areas of witness and service as followers of Christ? As Doug Kaufmann says on TV, “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” We’d better not play Hokey Pokey with the purpose of the church.

We discussed the cosmic perspective on restoration, and touched on the ecclesiastical perspective. Finally, what about the *personal perspective*? There’s not time left to say much about that, but it’s all part of the same picture; in the New Testament there’s really no difference between these three. It’s all one restoration, brought about by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you’re a renewed person — restored to what God intended people to be in his image — then you’re part of the body of Christ. And if you’re part of the body, you’re already part of the new creation, the “new heaven and a new earth.” Jesus is our window into the future; when God raised him from the dead, a “new heaven and a new earth” came into being for every person who is in Christ.

How do we get refreshed? How do we get restored? Peter gives us a clue when he says that “times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” It’s the Lord’s *presence* with us, and in us, that makes the difference. And his presence has both a future dimension and a present dimension.

Of what’s to come, Paul wrote this to the Philippians: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV). The Savior doesn’t come to take us someplace else, but to make us different *here* from what we are like now. How that’s going to happen is a mystery — something still to be revealed — but it’s the clear promise of the New Testament.

Nevertheless, as Paul reminds the Ephesians, God has already “raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 2:6). Restoration doesn’t have to wait for tomorrow, because it’s happening today. When we decide that it’s not really about me, after all, but it’s about God and his purpose, then we begin to be transformed into the people we’re supposed to be. How does that happen, how can we experience those “times of refreshing”? Certainly *staying close to the Lord* in worship, in thought and in deed is a big part of the process. *His presence with us* is the key. For, as Paul told the Philippians, “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13 NIV).

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