

Provision for Our Predicament

John 3:16

I saw an interview on television that I'll never forget. Four young men had been fishing several miles out to sea off the coast of Florida when their boat capsized. For hours they clung desperately to the hull of that vessel, until panic overtook their better judgment, compelling them to try and swim for land.

Because each of them had varying degrees of strength, endurance, and ability, they were eventually separated from each other—forced to face their fears of sharks, exhaustion, and death, alone.

Miraculously, all of them were discovered and rescued, but during the interview I was struck by a comment one of them made when he was asked what was going through his mind during those thirty hours in the open sea. That's a lot of time to reflect. That's a lot of time to contemplate the meaning of life and the reasons for your own existence. He simply said, "I realized how incredibly small I was."

That comment may seem rather self-evident, coming from someone who was an inconspicuous speck in a vast expanse of sea, but it takes a fair amount of courage and a great deal of honesty to come up with that conclusion.

By the way, you don't have to be enveloped by ocean to realize how small you are. Go outside on a clear night, look up at the stars, and try to remember what you learned in your fourth grade science class. There are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches of the world combined, and most stars are thousands of times bigger than the earth, and dozens of times bigger than the sun.

Do you realize how incredibly *tiny* that makes you and me? Now, how does that make you feel?

It's not a very comfortable feeling for many. We don't like to feel small. In fact, we will go to great lengths to *keep* from feeling small, because when we feel small we feel insignificant, unimportant, and inconsequential, and those are feelings that can plunge us into despair.

And so what do we do? We deny or escape the truth by pretending we are big. We surround ourselves with people who will inflate our egos and give us a sense of importance. We attain positions of power or accumulate wealth in order to make us feel bigger than others and bigger than we really are. We try to convince ourselves that our value is determined by how we look, what we wear, who we know, how we perform, and what we own. We escape into a fantasy world of drugs, sex, entertainment, recreation, athletics, adventure, religion.

But when you plug up those escape routes, when you take away all the props and all the diversions, and you come face to face with the cold, hard facts of who you are in relation to this vast universe in which we are mere microscopic particles, just how important, how significant, how valuable do you really think you are?

Scientists tell me that I'm a blob of protoplasm. Philosophers have concluded that I'm just a fading ripple in the waters of time. Sociologists liken me to a rat running through a maze and statisticians tell me my chances of making it. But is that all there is?

When we look up at the stars into a universe that is beyond our comprehension and ask, "Who am I? What is life all about? Can someone please tell me if there is such a thing as meaning and significance?" And we cup our ears, waiting for an answer.

And the answer has come, and it begins like this: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”* (Gen. 1:1). There is a Master Designer. There is an intelligent Creator who has brought everything into existence—a Creator who set the world apart to be a special place. In His infinite wisdom God chose to place extraordinary value on this minuscule planet we call earth.

But what is this God like? We know from creation that He’s great and powerful and intelligent, but is He personal? And the answer continues: *“God created man in his own image; male and female created he them and God saw what he had made and, behold, it was very good”* (Gen. 1:27).

It was very good because God created them totally secure, totally free, totally fulfilled, and totally satisfied. Through their intellect, free will, and emotions they were to be the showcase of God’s glorious gallery of created things—complete and perfect, beautiful and responsible, living in uninterrupted peace and harmony with one another and God.

But something terrible happened in that perfect environment. There was an intruder—a very powerful and clever evil spirit being named Satan, the adversary of God, who deceived woman into eating fruit from a tree that God had expressly forbidden them to eat of. Satan told her it would make her wise like God. And she told the man—Adam—and he wasn’t deceived. He deliberately chose to forsake the love and security of his relationship with God and follow Eve in disobedience.

And as a result, everything changed. Sin entered the world. The man and the woman forfeited their close communion and fellowship with God. They lost their security and freedom and peace, evidenced by the fact that, after they sinned, they tried to hide from God. They made clothes for themselves to try to cover a feeling they had never known before—shame. They were afraid, and empty, and guilty. They were different.

Every human being born into this world has suffered the consequences of Adam and Eve’s fateful sin. We are born with a sin nature—an insatiable urge to go our own way and do our own thing without regard for our Creator. The Bible says it this way, *“All of us like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way”* (Isaiah 53:6).

Not satisfied to be under His protection, care, and guidance, we have willfully wandered off like our first parents, under the mistaken notion that we will find greener pastures on our own; under the fatal illusion that freedom means independence—fatal because the path on which we have wandered leads to a precipice that we cannot avoid. A precipice that results in, not just physical death, but eternal death.

Friends, the greatest crime of humanity is that we have forsaken the God who created us for His own pleasure. We have said in effect, “I want to be my own god. I want to call my own shots and determine my own destiny”. And it really goes back to our search for significance. We want to feel big and important. But we’ve been horribly deceived by the same adversary that deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Instead of finding freedom we’ve become entangled in our own selfish desires until we’ve become mastered by them. Instead of finding security we have found uncertainty and instability. Instead of finding meaning we have found disillusionment. Instead of finding love we’ve found lust and broken commitments. Instead of finding peace we’ve become entangled in recurring tension and turmoil.

We haven’t found anything we really wanted. And things have progressively gotten worse because we’ve wandered further and further away from the Source of true freedom and security and meaning and love and peace, until we’ve become lost and lonely and

incredibly empty. And the further we roam the smaller we feel and the more we try to compensate by pretending to be big, pretending we're okay, pretending we're in control, pretending we're not afraid.

And in our honest moments we look up at the heavens and we say, "Is there anything worth living for? Is there such a thing as hope?"

And God's answer spills over into a sour world. *"For God so loved the world...For God so loved the world that he gave his only Begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

Into this world Jesus came. The second Adam. The perfect bearer of God's image. Because unlike Adam, He was not a *created* being. This was the *Creator*, emptying Himself of His glory, relinquishing many of His divine attributes, changing His form, becoming a tiny, helpless baby, who would grow into a man that would be the Savior of the world.

God became flesh and lived among us. This was God's method of rescuing a rebellious human race from our lost and sinful condition, and restoring us to a place of intimacy and harmony with Himself.

And He did it for one simple and yet incomprehensible reason. Because He loves us. Not that there's anything in us that would attract us to Him. We are by nature His enemies. We are rebels. Whether that takes the form of out and out defiance and rejection or whether we quietly ignore Him—we are rebellious.

But God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were rebellious, He sent His Son Jesus Christ into this world—to become one of us, to live among us, to let us see what God looks like, and to do something for us that only He can do. He came to die in our place.

For all the wonderful things Jesus did when He was on this earth—the lessons He taught, the miracles He performed, the kindness He displayed, the power He demonstrated—it was His death that had the most profound impact upon humanity. You see, His death was not a senseless act of violence as the disciples had first thought. It was the pinnacle of God's plan to rescue mankind. Jesus had said early on in His ministry, *"The Son of Man came into this world... to give his life a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45).

What does that mean? The Bible tells us that sin must be punished, and the punishment for sin is death, which is more than just physical death, it is eternal separation from God in hell. That is the fair punishment that every person who sins deserves. And the only way to escape that punishment is to never have sinned at all—to be perfect. Such is the righteous requirement of a holy God.

That's not very good news for the human race since no one meets those requirements. But God is not only a just and holy God, He is full of mercy and grace. And because Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life—a life of pure love and pure holiness, He was qualified to be our Substitute. And that's exactly what happened when He hung on that cross. Jesus bore the sins of the world in His body—from the tiniest white lie to the most horrendous murder—so that His holy body was saturated with the filth of human wickedness. And then His Father deliberately kindled His anger—an anger that had been stored up since the very first sin and which had intensified with every successive sin, and He funneled it upon the body of His Son, so that Jesus became the object of His wrath.

That body—that bleeding body bore our sin and experienced our punishment so that God's justice could be satisfied and we wouldn't have to be punished; so that we could become God's friends; so that we could be forgiven; so that we could have eternal life.

That's why Jesus came to this earth. He came to die. He died in order to save you—

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to forgive your sins, to redeem you from the kingdom of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of light, to reconcile you to God and give you eternal life, because you cannot secure these things for yourself.

You say, "Well how can you be so sure that His death accomplished all that?"

We can be sure because of one simple reason. It's the reason we are meeting here today, and it is the event we are going to be celebrating for the rest of the time we're together this morning.

Reversing the Irreversible

Everybody loves a good comeback. An athlete, for example, who bounces back from career threatening surgeries and scandals to win a major championship. A cancer patient, who, after months of radiation and chemotherapy, is given a clean bill of health. People who overcome some seemingly insurmountable obstacle, who conquer some adversity and emerge victorious. Watching someone rebound from the grave of apparent defeat is one of the things that makes life so exciting.

But there is one thing from which we cannot rebound, no matter how hard we try, no matter how many technological advancements we make. It is death. Oh, we have developed ways of prolonging life. But we cannot prevent death. Death is the one thing that is inevitable. And it is the one thing that is irreversible. And it is this *finality* that makes death so very painful.

Many of us have experienced the sting of death as loved ones have departed this life. The disciples and friends of Jesus felt that sting in the hours that followed His crucifixion. They were devastated; they were in a state of shock.

This was their friend with whom they had spent almost every waking hour for three years. Together they had talked and laughed and eaten and prayed and shared every experience. They had seen Him in virtually every conceivable circumstance, and had never ceased to be amazed by Him—His purity, His authority, His love, His patience, His power, His wisdom. The more they were with Him the more they were filled with wonder.

They loved Him. But what is more, they were loved *by* Him. Loved by One who knew everything about them—every idiosyncrasy, every flaw, every impure thought and motive. And yet He loved them with a love that never diminished or fluctuated, and such an unconditional love accentuated their grief.

But the disciples were also struggling with disappointment and disillusionment. No one is fully prepared for death, but it was the last thing the disciples expected. This was Messiah! So they thought. He was supposed to overthrow the Roman government and establish a kingdom of His own. He would reign uncontested, and they would be His cabinet members, administering His will. But it was not to be, for He was dead. And death is final; it is the end.

When I was in Israel several years ago we asked our Jewish tour guide to describe the Messiah that he and some of his countrymen were looking for. “Oh,” he said, “He will be a lot like Jesus. He will be a prophet, a great teacher, and he will perform miracles. He will even suffer and be rejected by many. But he won’t die.”

It makes perfectly logical sense. Death is irreversible. What possible good can a dead Messiah do? He may be a source of inspiration, but you certainly cannot count on Him to be your king.

And that’s why the disciples and friends of Jesus were so devastated. Death did not fit into their picture.

Which brings us to Sunday morning, three days after Jesus had died and was buried. It had been another fitful night for the former followers of Jesus. Not only were their emotions swirling, but there had been an earthquake during the night, which likely intensified the despair they were already feeling.

And so, before dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and at least two other

women, hoping to calm their restless spirits and soothe their sorrow, went to look at the tomb. As they approached, about sunrise, their hearts must have skipped a beat as they saw that the massive stone had been rolled away.

Perplexed, they looked in the tomb and found that the body of Jesus was gone. Angels appeared to them saying, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He is risen, just as He said He would.”

Shocked and excited they ran to tell the disciples and on the way Jesus Himself appeared to them. But when they reached the disciples they could not and would not believe them. “People don’t just rise from the dead. Death is final! Death is irreversible!”

Later that day, however, Jesus Himself appeared to Peter, and then to ten of the disciples, and later to more than 500, before He ascended into heaven after forty days.

They touched Him. They put their hands in His wounds. They ate with Him. They conversed with Him and they were absolutely convinced that Jesus was alive.

So convinced were they that they spent the rest of their lives with a singular ambition—to bear witness to *this* event. To declare that Jesus was risen! So convinced were they that all of them were willing to experience persecution, abuse, imprisonment—all but one of them were murdered because they would not recant their testimony in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus had risen from the dead! Jesus had reversed the irreversible. From the grave of apparent defeat He delivered a fatal blow to man’s ultimate enemy—death.

His resurrection proved that He was who He said He was—Messiah, Son of the living God. It demonstrated His divine power. It established that His death on the cross did accomplish what He said it would—the forgiveness of sins and the defeat of the powers of darkness. It established His sovereignty over life and death.

It proves that all of His claims are reliable and true. And one of those claims was this, according to John’s gospel: *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...I tell you the truth, whoever hears my Word and believes him who sent me has eternal life...and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” (John 11:25; 5:24-25).*

It is the resurrection of Jesus that gives our lives meaning. The Apostle Paul said, “If Christ has not been raised our faith is in vain.” There would be no forgiveness of sins, no power to overcome our sinful tendencies and live as we ought to live. There would be no assurance of life after death. In short, no hope for the present or the future.

His resurrection gives us the confidence that there is more to life than what we experience with the five senses. There is a greater reality. The reality of a place—heaven—which transcends time and space, and the reality of a real, living Person, who, at this moment, is the Object of the unceasing worship of angels and loved ones who have gone before us—who surround His throne day and night, never ceasing to be amazed at His beauty, His glory, His majesty, His love, His kindness, His power.

I asked you at the beginning of this message: When you consider the universe, and you consider how incredibly small you are in comparison with the vast expanse, how do you know that you are significant? How can you be sure that there is meaning and hope? There’s only one reason. It’s because the God who made it all came to this earth and became a man, then went to a cross and died for your sins, and then exercised His power and rose from the dead. And it’s because that God *loves you*. And He’s given you an opportunity to know Him and relate to Him and live with Him forever, because of what Jesus did for you.

But all of this is contingent upon one thing. You must receive Him. You must believe that He is who He said He was—the Christ, the Son of God, and you must submit your life to Him. Let Him forgive you and cleanse you of your sin. Let Him clothe you in His righteousness and present you to God who will look at you and say, “Ah, on the basis of your faith in Jesus, you are acquitted of your guilt. You are pronounced holy and righteous. You are mine. Come, son...daughter, and see what it means to *really* live.”