

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

Christians have opened their Easter celebrations with those words for the last 2,000 years. And we have done so because on that first Easter morning Jesus defeated sin and death, and in His rising promised US forgiveness of sins, healing of our afflictions, and eternal life. But despite the fact that those promises will be fulfilled completely one day people still get sick right now. People still get Cancer right now. And people still die right now. That is because Christianity is both a “*now*” and “*not yet*” kind of thing.

We see this in what Luke records as Jesus’ first sermon. For in that sermon, He quoted the prophet Isaiah: “*the Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*” Luke then tells us how Jesus went out and actually cured the sick, healed the disabled, and raised the dead.

And yet, the fullness of everything Jesus had come to do had not yet been accomplished as the book of Luke came to a close. For even after Jesus went to the cross to die for our sins, and had risen from the dead, He gave His disciples instructions and then ascended back to heaven, where He once again sat down at the right hand of God the Father. For only at that point was ALL He had set out to do in taking on human flesh completed. And even then, not everything was completed. There was still more work to be done, more miracles to be performed, more healing yet to happen. And we see why in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. For they tell us in what they record as Jesus’ first public statement that He told the crowd to whom He was speaking: “*The time has come . . . the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*”

Listen to those words carefully. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus said “*the time has come,*” and then added that THE TIME THAT HAD COME was for the kingdom of God to be “*near.*” This means that while Jesus was ushering in some of the ways His kingdom would change the world right now, the FULLNESS of that change - and the TOTALITY of that which would be changed - was yet to occur. For that reason, most translators have moved away from the old King James phrasing of this verse, which had Jesus use the English phrase “*the kingdom of God IS AT HAND*,” to quoting Jesus as saying the kingdom of God is “*near.*”

We see this in the book of Acts. For early in that book, we are told that soon after Jesus rose from the dead and had sent His apostles out to tell the world of His rising from the dead, Peter and John “*were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer.*” And as they approached the temple, they saw a crippled man begging. Luke then tells us that Peter approached the man, and said “*silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*” And the man did just that. Since there were eyewitnesses, it caused quite a stir.

A crowd gathered. People started asking questions. And then Peter took advantage of the opportunity the commotion gave him to speak to the people about the state of their soul. In the midst of that sermon, Peter said “*repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that*

*times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus. [For] He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as He promised long ago through His holy prophets."*

In this statement, Peter explains why people still get sick in this present world, why people still get horrible diseases like Cancer in the here and now of this present life, and why we will all still die one day. And his answer is to say that Christianity is both a "now" and "not yet" thing. That is because God does will to free us from the pain and sorrow of this fallen and sinful world. And in seeking to do that, God does sometimes intervene in our lives, and bring about miraculous interventions. We see this documented throughout the Bible too, from Abraham and Sarah having a child in their old age, to the children of Israel being given the Promised Land, to the exiled Israelites being brought back to the Promised Land. And then, most fully, we see this displayed in Jesus and rising from the dead. But even that was not the end of the story.

Jesus still had to ascend to heaven to be given, as Paul said, "*the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" Not that the gospel story ended even there, for it would be another fifty days before the Holy Spirit would be sent at Pentecost to complete the salvation story. Which brings us back to Peter.

As he stood in front of the temple after healing the cripple man, He said to the people "*repent, then, and turn to God, so your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*" When I hear that phrase, "*times of refreshing,*" I think of a period of rest in the midst of a time of work: a kind of pit stop or coffee break. In terms of our lives, Peter is therefore saying that in the midst of all the pain and sorrow that comes our way in this fallen and sinful world, God sometimes steps in and offers us "*times of refreshing*" to help us make it through.

Those who have read the Old Testament portion of the Bible know that God did this for the Israelites again and again. For they repeatedly disobeyed God. And after warning them over and over again, God would finally punish them. But then, after the punishment, God would seek to restore them to proper relationship again. In the most glaring example of this, God sent the Israelites off to exile in Babylon. And when they had learned from their mistakes, God brought them back to the Promised Land. But in telling them about what He was about to do in sending them into exile, God promised He would make up for what they would lose. Using the imagery of farming, God spoke through the prophet Joel to tell the people "*I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten . . . you will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the Lord.*" In other words, God would give them "*a time of refreshing.*"

When we turn our attention back to our suffering in this present world, and the promise of what happened on Easter to eventually bring about God's will for us, we see that answered prayer can be viewed in the meantime as a "*a time of refreshing.*" We see that healing from illness can be seen in the interim as a "*a time of refreshing.*" And we see that every time God does something that brings us joy, or does something that solves a difficulty in our life, we can see it as "*a time of*

*refreshing.*” And beyond that wonderful gift, we are also promised that one day God will usher in the fullness of His kingdom.

And when that happens, Peter says God will “*send the Christ, who has been appointed for you - even Jesus . . . to restore everything, as He promised long ago through His holy prophets.*” When that happens Isaiah says that “*the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.*” And the Apostle John says “*they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*”

As I think about God’s kingdom being a “*now*” and “*not yet*” reality, I liken it to a game of chess. I have played chess since high school. By professional chess standards, I’m not that good. But as they grew up, each of our boys tried to learn from me how to play chess. And more importantly to them, they tried to learn how to beat daddy. Through most of their trying to do so, it was nevertheless easy for me to win. I was older. I knew more about the game. And if that didn’t work, I had many more years of cheating under my belt. [Only kidding.] I could have said to the boys that since we both knew who was going to win, there was no point in playing. But if we did not play, that assertion would not be proven. So, we played, again and again and again.

In terms of our lives, and the “*now*” aspect of the kingdom of God, there is something similar going on. We know that Jesus has overcome Satan. We know that Jesus offers us, as Paul says, “*spiritual blessings in heavenly places.*” And we know that Jesus does this in the here and now of this world to give us “*times of refreshing*” in the midst of our current pain and sorrows. But to receive those “*times of refreshing,*” and have them give us comfort in the midst of the sickness, disease, and suffering we currently experience in this life, we have to “play the game.”

We do this by heeding Jesus’ command to “*pick up our cross.*” We do this by responding to Jesus’ invitation to “*follow Me.*” And we do this by responding in the way Peter invited the crowd to respond as they stood in front of the temple after he healed the crippled man. For Peter said to them “*repent, and turn to God, so your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and He may send the Christ . . . as He promised long ago through His holy prophets.*” For if we don’t do those things, the victory Jesus wants us to experience in the here and now of this fallen and sinful world will be nothing more than a rumor.

This means that if the “*now*” and “*not yet*” reality of God’s kingdom is indeed like a game of chess, we have to remember that as bad things happen, and final victory seems to hold off longer than we want (or God seems to be withholding the particular type of healing we are seeking), we have to keep playing the game. We see this the games of chess I played with my boys. That is because when we would play, they’d be serious about it because they wanted to take me down. But then, half-way through the game, they’d go from serious to upset. Usually, it was because I would smile. And the reason I would smile was that they would have just made a move that I knew was the beginning of the end. For from that point on it was merely a matter of time before the bad move they had just

made would cost them the game.

When it comes to life itself, the same reality is true. On the morning Jesus rose from the dead, the game was already over. Sure, there were lots of moves left to play, but the end of the game was already in sight. So, just as I had to continue to play the game out with my boys, using as many moves as it would take to bring the game to an end, so we need to follow the instructions of the Apostle Paul to “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*” For that is not only the way that we will one day win the battle against illness, and disease, and the state of sin that the book of Genesis tells us is the cause of those horrible things, it is also the only way to be blessed by “*times of refreshing*” God wants to give us this Easter Day. Let us then seek to receive such blessings for Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!