

Easter

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[0 : 01] Where would you place yourself on the spectrum between idealism and cynicism? In your normal orientation to life, the way you make sense of your experiences, your thoughts about the future, are you more the kind of person who is an optimist, you assume the best about things, you have a confidence that things will work out, or are you more the kind of person who sees through things, who perhaps assumes the worst about people and their motivations?

I think maybe some of us have a clear sense that we're on one side or the other. Certainly, I think we live in a culture that's a little more cynical, so perhaps the majority of you might place yourselves there. Or perhaps most of us are a combination of both of these.

The late comedian George Carlin said that every cynic, inside every cynic, is a disappointed idealist.

In other words, life crushes our idealism one too many times, and we begin to take comfort in cynicism. We begin to put it on and wear it like a protective armor to guard against the pain of disillusionment.

I remember when I was in third grade, and one of my friends came up to me, and in a very quiet, confiding voice, he said, Tommy, you still believe in Santa, don't you?

[1 : 32] And I said, yeah, of course I do. And I put my hand on his shoulder, because it was obvious that he was struggling with unbelief.

And right then, he turned and he yelled to the whole class, Tommy still believes in Santa Claus. And everybody laughed.

And for the rest of the year, the class made fun of me. And here I am today. But I remember as a third grader getting, for the first time, a taste of that, that shame that comes with realizing that you've been naive, or that you've been taken as a fool.

And I remember, for the first time, deciding, that will never happen to me again. I will never allow myself to be that naive. And I began to recognize the comfort that cynicism can provide, the protective coating that it can become.

No one in this room wants to be taken for a fool. Right? So given the world that we live in, the state of our country, the state of our culture, it's worth asking, as we come to Easter and the claims of Easter, it's worth asking, what kind of outlook should we have?

[2 : 54] Should we be more idealistic? Should we be more cynical? Right? Idealism feels really good. It feels good to have such a pleasant outlook, such optimism.

But we risk being naive. And worse than that, we risk losing touch with the fact that there is real brokenness and darkness in the world.

Right? We've been reminded this week that it takes more than Kendall Jenner and a can of Pepsi to heal the brokenness of society. Right? On the other side, cynicism allows us to really take an unflinching look at the brokenness in the world.

And yet, it can only deconstruct. It doesn't offer anything. And it brings with it a hopelessness that makes life unbearable. So this is where Easter comes in and why Easter is such a big deal.

Because Easter, and specifically the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, brings with it not only a promise, but an entirely new outlook on life.

[4 : 06] An outlook that is utterly unique to Christians. Right? It's neither idealism nor is it cynicism. It's what you might call hopeful realism.

Right? It allows Christians to be simultaneously more based in reality, more realistic than the most hardened cynic.

And at the same time, we can be more wildly hopeful than the most deluded idealist. We're able to be both at the same time. And I really believe that this is only possible if you believe in the

resurrection and understand the meaning of it for those of us here.

And so that's what we're going to talk about. How this perspective is possible because of the resurrection and what difference that makes. We're going to look at Romans chapter 8. This is a very rich passage. It's many people's favorite chapter in the Bible.

We're admittedly not going to be able to touch on everything that is referenced in this reading. We're going to focus in on this perspective. But at this point in the letter, Paul has laid out the gospel.

[5 : 08] And he's trying to convince us, his readers, about the truth and the power of the gospel. Which is centered on the resurrection of Jesus. And what that means for us right here and now.

So Romans 8, 18 to 28. First realism in light of the resurrection. And then hopefulness. And how they come together in Easter. Let's pray.

Our Father, we do recognize that this day, the very existence of this church, is because of the resurrection of your son, Jesus. And it's because of his resurrection that we believe the Bible.

We don't have any reason to trust the Bible other than the fact that you rose from the grave. And that makes your words the most important words in existence.

And so, Lord, we ask that for right now you would remove all other words from our minds. All other claims from our minds. And that you would allow us to focus solely on what you have to say to us this evening.

[6 : 08] That these written words would reveal to us the living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, we're going to focus in on realism.

How does the resurrection and what does scripture tell us about the reality, the hard truth of the world that we live in? And Romans 8 has a couple of very hard truths that we have to accept about life here and now.

So if you're looking for an uplifting Easter sermon, it's not going to happen right now. We'll get to that, but we've got some hard plowing ahead before we get there.

The Bible uses two pretty striking words here to describe our condition. Futility and corruption.

Futility and corruption. Futility, that word actually first shows up in Romans chapter 1.

And Paul is describing how human beings who were created by God have exchanged the glory of God for the love and the worship of created things.

[7 : 11] And as a result of that great exchange, we've been subjected to futility. Now, what does that mean? Well, there's a lot of ways to define futility. Emptiness, fruitlessness, right?

Meaninglessness, all of those things. Vanity is often used in the Old Testament. But a way of thinking about it is this. Futility means that our longings will never be fulfilled in this life.

I told you, not too uplifting, but bear with me. Our longings will never be fulfilled. The word futility shows up 36 times in the book of Ecclesiastes.

We're introduced to a man named Solomon who's tried everything to find fulfillment. Right? He's tried wealth. He's tried success. He's tried the beauty of his homes and his gardens. He's tried knowledge and learning and intellectual achievement.

He's tried pleasure from food and from art and from music and from sex. He's tried everything he can think of. And none of it satisfies. None of it fulfills him.

[8 : 17] And what this shows us is that none of our longings will ever be fulfilled in this life. Our spiritual longing will never be satisfied. Right? Even for those of us who are Christians.

There will always be a sense of disconnect. There will always be a sense of distance. There will always be periods in the Christian life of drought, of wilderness wandering, of questioning.

For some of us, our entire faith from here to when we meet Jesus face to face will be a tooth and nail battle of doubt. That that's the reality. We have a foretaste.

But we live in a condition of futility. Right? Our sexual longings will never be fully satisfied. And I mean that broadly speaking. The desire for intimacy. The desire for love. The desire to be known. The desire to belong. The desire to be fully connected and intermingled, co-mingled with another human being. That will never be fully satisfied. Even if you have a really great marriage and really great kids and a really great family.

[9 : 19] You will go through periods of loneliness and disconnect and relational breakdown. It will happen because of futility. Our professional longings will never be fully satisfied.

Simply put, we will always be able to imagine and envision more than we can actually accomplish. I don't know if you know anything about that.

The sense of what you would like to be able to do. What you imagine yourself accomplishing. And the reality of what you can actually do. There will always be a gap. A disconnect. Right? Futility. It's all futility. Thorns and thistles, Genesis 3 says. We will always meet resistance. It will always be a struggle. So we can try everything out there like Solomon did, but we're never going to find it. So that's the first thing. Second thing. Add to this corruption. Verse 21. Corruption not like political corruption. Corruption in the sense of decay.

[10:19] Everything breaks down. Right? Second law of thermodynamics. Everything in creation is expending more energy than it can replenish. Things decay.

They come apart. They return to dust. And not just us, but it says all of creation is subjected to corruption. In bondage to corruption.

Right? So cosmically, socially, emotionally, psychologically. Governments collapse. One day the United States will collapse.

Could be a hundred years from now. Could be next year. I won't say anything else. Could be. Who knows? We don't know.

Right? Economies crash. We've been reminded of that. Right? Friendships fade. You have a BFF. You can't imagine ever not being friends with that person.

[11:16] Life changes and you grow apart. And you put more and more and more effort and it just doesn't. You just go grow in separate directions. Right? Your body wastes away. Right? Things fade.

Corruption. So essentially, to summarize these things in Romans 8, it says here's the cold, hard reality of the world that we live in. Life is hard and nothing lasts.

And this is an extremely hard pill to swallow. And so our culture is full of things that help us cope. Mythologies and ideologies and philosophies and religions that help us cope with these realities. Right? So our culture in particular loves the idea of the power of positive thinking. Right? Norman Vincent Peale. Now you may not know who that is, but you've been around this way of thinking because it infuses our culture.

It infuses large swaths of the Christian church. Right? If I believe it enough, if I want it enough, if I send enough positive thoughts out into the world, the universe or the divine or God will return it back to me.

[12:19] I will get what I want if I want it and believe it enough. Right? The power of positive thinking. In addition, most religions are, broadly speaking, karma-based religions in the sense that in some way or another, they say that good things ultimately happen to good people and bad things ultimately happen to bad people.

Right? So eventually it all comes around and you get what's coming to you for better or for worse. Broadly speaking, karma-based religions.

And ideas like this, power of positive thinking and karma, they're comforting because they give us some sense of control or some sense that we can do something to affect the futility and the corruption.

But I think we're all adults here. And we've all lived some life. And I think we can admit that that's not the world that we live in.

That's just simply not reality. We live in a world where really bad things sometimes happen to good people. And frustratingly good things happen to really bad people.

[13:28] And we see that all of the time, even in our justice system. Right? Our best human attempts at fairness and justice. Often we see really bad things happening to good people.

And vice versa. So these are nice ideas, but I'm not sure they align with reality. Sometimes you can want something with all of your might and the job still doesn't come through.

The cancer still isn't cured. The family doesn't get back together. Right? So ultimately life is hard and everything is breaking down. And on our own we have no control over these things.

And nothing we do will make any difference. I think I should be a motivational speaker. I think. But this is point one. Hard pill to swallow. Right? So this is the intense realism of Christianity.

I mean this is more realistic. This is more unflinching realism than you'll see even in the most hardened cynic. But that's only half of the story.

[14:28] Because Easter changes everything. And this leads us into the second half of our uniquely Christian resurrection perspective. The hopefulness that Easter offers.

And you see that in verse 18 of Romans 8. Paul says, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Paul's saying, I consider all of this suffering, it's not even worth comparing to the future glory. And you may think, well that's easy for Paul to say. He probably just sat in an ivory tower somewhere praying and thinking and writing.

But in fact, Paul had faced some pretty extreme suffering. He's a man who knows suffering intimately. He had been whipped. He had been beaten. He had been stoned. He had been shipwrecked.

Robbed. Betrayed by his friends. Imprisoned multiple times. And subjected to hunger and thirst and homelessness. Right? This is a man who knows something about suffering.

[15:33] But then he goes on to use a metaphor about suffering in verse 22. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. So listen to what he's saying there.

He's saying that all of the suffering, all of the futility, all of the corruption and decay and breakdown and unfulfillment, all of that. He likens to labor pains.

Now, women know a little bit more about this than I do. But from what I hear, labor pain is some of the worst pain you can possibly feel.

And I've actually had a number of women. A lot of people have had babies in our church. And some people have told me, in fact, that during that moment where they were at the peak pain, right, they had moments of actually thinking that they were going to die.

That it can be that extreme. Right? And yet, out of this experience of suffering and death, you have a new life that emerges and enters into the world.

[16:44] And there's no comparison between the glory and the joy of that new life and the suffering that came before it. And even as the child is laid in the mother's arms already, the memory of that suffering is beginning to simply melt away.

It's melting in the light of the glory of this new life. And so Paul is saying, Easter changes everything because Easter shows us that all of our suffering and all of our struggle against futility and corruption, all of that is like labor pains.

And that one day we will experience a renewal so profound, so utterly, incomprehensibly more, that it will be as though all of this life was a time of gestation in the womb.

Before we actually entered into the real world. I don't know if you saw this viral video that went around the last couple of weeks of a grandfather who had only been able to see in black and white his whole life.

He had been totally colorblind. Anybody see this video? And the family gets some special glasses that they give him, these glasses that will allow him to see the full range of color for the first time in like 66 years.

[18:05] And he's kind of playing it down and laughing. And oh, this is so sweet and thoughtful. And opens it and they're all sitting around. And he puts the glasses up to his face and immediately breaks into tears.

And immediately pulls the glasses off because he can't handle the beauty. And then he puts them back on and then he takes them off and the tears just begin to flow down his face. All family starts crying.

It's a really moving video. And you see him gradually, he's able to tolerate the beauty. He puts it on a little more and a little more. And then he begins to look and to see as though for the first time his family and the trees and the rocks and the sky and all of the colors around him.

And it's as though he's looking at everything for the very first time. And I think that's what Paul is saying that one day we will realize that we've been living all of our lives in black and white.

That we'll realize that we've been living all of our lives in two dimensions. Right? That at some point this renewal is going to happen and it will be like an entirely new mode of existence.

[19:05] And all of this will be like time spent in the womb. Just a preparation for that day. Right? And then he goes on to say something really profound that we need to think about. He says not only is creation groaning in anticipation of this renewal.

But he says we ourselves are groaning in anticipation of this. He's saying on some deep level you know in your guts that this is happening.

We know it. And we long for it. We yearn for it. There's a beloved 19th century Japanese haiku poet known as Isa.

And when Isa was a young child his mother died very tragically. And then over the course of his life he faced a number of really hard tragedies.

And then he ended up having a daughter. And then he lost his daughter. Tragically. And so he was in deep grief and mourning. He was a committed Buddhist.

[20 : 06] And so he went to a Zen master looking for comfort or solace of some kind. And the Zen master reminded Isa what Zen Buddhism teaches. Which is that all of the world is an illusion.

And that one day all of this will evaporate like the morning dew. All of this is like the morning dew.

And it will simply one day evaporate as the sun rises into the sky.

So Isa returns home and he sits down and he writes a short poem after this visit. And here's the poem. The world is due. The world is due.

And yet. And yet. And here's what Osginas says about this man. Isa, the Orthodox Zen believer, must say that life is only due.

But Isa, the father, the husband, the human being, with his agonized grief and tortured love, can only cry into the unfulfilled darkness where Zen sheds no light.

[21 : 16] And yet. He feels the inescapable tension between the logic of what he believes and the logic of who he is.

In other words. There's the logical part of him that doesn't believe in Christianity. Doesn't believe in Jesus. Doesn't believe in Easter. Doesn't believe in resurrection. Doesn't believe any of that.

Believes. Logically. All life is due.

That's what I've been taught. That's my world view. And yet there's something underneath that. In his guts. In his marrow. That says that's got to be wrong. There has to be more to this.

My mother was not due. My daughter is not due. They don't just evaporate. They're not just gone.

There has to be something beyond this. And he knows it. He's groaning.

That's the groaning. That's the groaning. And what Easter tells us is Easter says this. Good news. Your groaning is appropriate.

[22 : 14] It's perfect as a response to these tragedies. In fact, all of your longings. Not just your grief. But all of your longings.

Your spiritual longing. For once and for all connection with God. Your sexual longing. To finally have an end to your loneliness. And to be totally perfectly joined to another. Your professional longings.

Your psychological. Your emotional. All of those longings. Your physical longings. Those longings are there for a reason. They're meant to point you toward someone.

Right? See, Christians get a bad rap. We're often misunderstood as people who are anti-desire.

You know, that we don't like desire. That we want to keep all of our desires in check. And we'd be very regimented about not liking or enjoying anything too much.

We don't want to have too much fun or any of those things. Now, there is something to be said for self-control. For the cultivation of character and virtue. But I'll tell you, the problem is not the fact that we have desires.

[23 : 11] We have those for a very good reason. Where we go wrong is when we actually begin to think that those desires can be fully satisfied here. Or anywhere other than God himself.

Other than when we see Jesus Christ face to face. So, this is why Christians, as we step back out from this, can be so wildly hopeful.

And I think more hopeful than the most idealistic idealist. It's because when we look at the evidence of the resurrection, there's a compelling case that it actually happened.

And if it actually happened, then my yearning and my groaning has an end. It has a telos. It has an aim that it will one day encounter. Right? And so, I look at the resurrection and we recognize, as Christians, that there's compelling evidence for the resurrection.

You know, the resurrection is interesting because it's actually based on eyewitness accounts. And we know that more than we used to. For a long time, most people said in scholarship that, well, you know, Jesus died and he had a lot of loyal followers.

[24 : 15] And they didn't know what to do. And they were very disappointed. And then, in the centuries that followed, a mythology grew up around Jesus. And the idea of resurrection began to become popular. And then they began to write these accounts of the resurrection.

But they were written several centuries after Jesus. And so, really, most of it is just fabricated. But actually, more recent scholarship has actually discovered that it's much more likely that these accounts were written a lot earlier than we previously thought.

If you want to read into that, Richard Baucom's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is a fantastic sort of survey of this scholarship that shows that these accounts were actually written within the lifetime of people who were around when all of this happens.

And that's a point that, for those of us here who are Christians, we should think about that very seriously. Because if you think about most religions and the way they start, most religions start with a founder, you know, Joseph Smith, Prophet Muhammad, somebody like that.

And that founder gets a private revelation from God or some kind of private experience of the divine. They're alone. They're in the woods. They're on a mountain. They're by themselves. This happens. And then they take that experience and they go to a bunch of other people and they say, this is what happened to me and it was amazing and you need to follow me now.

[25 : 33] And people say, okay, and they follow the teacher. But it's all based on that one testimony. But Christianity is radically different from that. In fact, it's the only religion I know where the entire founding of the religion was a very public affair.

Jesus was a very public figure. He had a public life, public ministry, a public trial, public execution, public resurrection. It was all very public.

Right? After his resurrection, Paul says, there were over 500 witnesses who saw Jesus. So Paul is not saying, I had this encounter with Jesus. I know you didn't, but I did. Believe me, it actually happened.

Trust me, follow me. That's not the story of Christianity. Paul's saying all of these people saw it. And in fact, none of the critics, none of the enemies of Christianity in the early centuries, none of them were trying to deny the resurrection.

It was just too out there. Right? And it's interesting, even when you read the accounts, you have all of these different accounts of the resurrection in Scripture. And people say, well, why are the details all different and jumbled?

[26 : 35] Well, it's because you have all of these eyewitnesses trying to write down what they saw. Right? What they heard. Right? So if this was a mythology that developed, you would have much more uniformity in the accounts.

Right? If it was a myth, then all of the accounts would be the same. Once upon a time, Mary was walking along. She came. Right? That would be the, but no, the details are different. Right? And this person says, well, he ate broiled fish.

And this person says, well, there were two disciples and one of them was named Cleopas. Right? And this person says, well, there was this Mary and then there was the other Mary. Right? And why are they using those kinds of references?

Well, they're like first century footnotes. Right? They're saying, oh, the servant's name was Malchus. Right? Oh, okay. So if you don't believe, go and ask Malchus and he'll tell you more. Right? These are first century footnotes. Even Paul, when he, in Acts chapter 26, when he's talking to King Agrippa, he's making his defense. And he says at one point, very interestingly, he says, he says, oh, King, you know that these things are true because they didn't happen in a closet.

[27 : 41] They didn't happen in a corner. Right? He's saying, he's saying, you know this happened. I don't have to convince you because it happened in full view of everybody. And Agrippa doesn't disagree.

So the thing is, if the resurrection happened, that's actually a guarantee that the same resurrection is going to happen to us. And that's why it matters.

It's a guarantee that the same thing is actually going to happen to the whole world. All of creation, the cosmos, will go through a cosmic resurrection. Right?

So this is why Christians, as a result of Easter, are able to have a very unique outlook on life. I don't think you're going to find this in any other philosophy or religion anywhere.

What I would call hopeful realism. It allows us to be simultaneously more realistic than the cynics and more hopeful than the idealists.

[28 : 36] We can be both at the same time. Things that shouldn't be able to coexist. And the great thing about this is that it's an outlook that makes it possible to maintain balance and perspective and to stay even keel, regardless of whatever craziness is happening.

And right now, with our country and our culture and the world the way it is, that is the kind of perspective that the world is desperately in need of. People who can maintain perspective. Regardless.

Christians are able to face tremendous suffering without losing hope. And we're able to face tremendous blessing without losing touch. And that's a great gift.

And by the way, this is why when you go to different parts of the world where there is a lot of suffering and injustice, this is why you always see Christians there. Right? It's interesting. I like to quote Nicholas Kristof every now and then.

He's not a Christian. But every now and then, in the Times, he writes an article about Christians. And it's because as a reporter, he has to travel to some of the worst places, the most broken, awful places where people are suffering and dying.

[29 : 43] And he says everywhere he goes, the worst places he goes, when all of the aid groups have pulled out and everybody is gone, it's just gotten too bad, he says, you always find Christians there.

He says, many times they're the only ones there. Now why is that? Hopeful realism. It's because Christians are able to face tremendous suffering and darkness and never lose hope.

And it's because that's exactly what God has done for us. That's exactly what God has done for us. It's a reflection of his heart through us in the world.

So back to our original question as we bring this to a close. Are you a cynic? Are you an idealist? Are you an idealist hiding behind an armor of cynicism?

You want to know the real reason I think most of us are cynical? The real reason I think, I mean, the reason I know I struggle with cynicism? Especially when it comes to something like Easter.

[30 : 50] You hear claims about the resurrection. You say, I just don't know. I just don't know if I can go there. We're cynical. I want to see through it. I want to think my way around it. Why are we like that?

I think it's because we live in a world that makes promises that are full of emptiness. Again and again and again.

A platform. A product. Some proposition. And we buy it. And we try it. And it lets us down. And that hurts.

And we feel stupid. And naive. And we say, that's not going to happen again. And it happens again and again and again. Promises full of emptiness. But what we need to understand is that Easter is completely different.

Because unlike the world that gives us promises full of emptiness. Easter gives us emptiness full of promise. Empty cross.

[31 : 47] Empty tomb. Empty grave clothes. Emptiness. Full of the promise that one day all of this will be renewed. In all of creation.

Will be full of the knowledge and the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we speak these words. And Lord, as we ask you today to help us grasp the truth of your resurrection.

What that means about the kind of God that you are. About your heart and your character. What that means for us here and now, Lord. I do ask that you would subvert our cynicism, Lord.

That you would invite us into the hopeful realism of knowing that no matter how hard things may be here and now. That we have an unbreakable promise.

A sure hope. Lord, I pray for those who are here who are enjoying a time of blessing and ease.

Lord, I pray that you would remind them of the reality of suffering. That they wouldn't lose touch.

[32 : 53] And for those who are here who are struggling. Who are facing futility and corruption. Who feel hopeless. Lord, that your resurrection would offer them hope.

That would lift them out of that dark place. And give them a vision of the life that is to come. Lord, we pray all of this for our good. And for your glory. In your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.