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WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, ALFIE?

Although I was raised in a Christian home, it didn't take. I thought Christianity was about "going to church," and at that point in my life going to church was as boring as dirt.

As I grew up I discovered some things that were really important: sex and getting high and making money. Everybody I knew agreed that those were the important things, they were what life was about. I thought that "religious" people were weird and that preachers, especially, were wimpy and ignorant. The wimpy part was significant to me because I yearned to be manly like my dad and knew inside that I fell short and would probably never win his approval. Alcohol and pornography helped me forget all that. (Thank the Lord that marijuana and cocaine were not around in those days before they invented electricity and the automobile.)

By the time I was 30 years old it was becoming clear to me that I was in trouble. Although I had a good job and a family, I was empty inside and feeling desperate. A guy named Wendell Stewart reached out to me. He was a brilliant geologist with Texaco who had a big job and had authored some books about geology. But being a geologist was just Wendell's career, he was really a burning evangelist for Christ. Over a period of many months his friendly visits convinced Doris and me to start attending his large young-adults class at a Methodist church and to start taking our kids to Sunday School.

It's hard to describe how God becomes real to you. It was a slowly dawning realization. I felt deep inside that God was tugging on me, speaking to me, inviting me to come to Him. I knew that I had to make a decision and that it was up to me. The idea of becoming a "religious person" was repulsive to me, and I suspected that church people had been brain-washed into believing a myth that had no objective reality. (Of course, my brain seriously needed to be washed, but that didn't occur to me.)

I recited to myself the reasons why it was foolish to take Christianity seriously: The Bible to me at that time may as well have been written in hieroglyphics. I couldn't make sense of it. I thought it was mythology, the flawed work of primitive men. The church was full of people who didn't live up to what they professed. Some of them I knew to be terrible hypocrites. Besides that, I knew I wasn't strong enough or good enough to live like a good Christian, and I didn't want to be another hypocrite. I seriously doubted that I would be able to conquer my addictions. It felt like I was being challenged to jump out of a plane without a parachute, and at the very least it was going to be painful and change my life....and it scared me to death. That Scriptural story of Jacob wresting with an angel during the night describes the experience perfectly.

I gradually came to a decision: "I'm not sure there is a God or that Christianity is the way to that God, but I hate my life and I'm going to go for it. If I'm a fool, then I'm a fool, but I have to do something. I'm going to jump. God, I know it was God, gave me the courage to take that leap of faith. And guess what? He was there to catch me.

The unconditional love of my father was something I had yearned for all my life. My dad gave the best that he had, but he was simply not able to fill that emptiness in my heart. My heavenly Father was able and willing to fill it, and He did. Glory, glory, glory! I wept more or less continuously for three days and three nights. Suddenly I "knew" God in a way I could never have imagined. And the Bible was magically transformed and spoke to me from the very being of God. I started carrying a little blue King James New Testament and probably read through it three or four times in three or four months. Later I read through the whole Bible every year for more than 50 years. And, sure enough, that decision was painful and it did change my life. It immediately caused a lot of friction between my wife and me. I had turned into a religious fanatic and appeared to her to be exhibiting a lot of symptoms of mental illness. Poor Doris!

And, as you know from your own life, that was not the end of the story but the beginning. I had experienced what Jesus calls being “Born again,” and being born is not the ultimate purpose of our life but the beginning. God had a little work to do. Have you seen a potter reach down into a bucket with both hands and lift out a wet, oozing gob of mud and set it on his wheel? That’s you and me at the start of the process of becoming a Christian, becoming like Christ. I think when God set me on the wheel, He said, “Oh, my cow!” But God has made a promise: *That good work which he has begun in you he will bring to completion in the day of Christ Jesus.* (Phil. 1:6) And it was not only God who had work to do, but I had a crucial part as well: *Work out your salvation (You work it out!) in fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, giving you the desire and the ability to do his will.* (Phil. 2:12-13) The amazing thing about the Potter is that when that lump of mud climbs off the wheel and collapses in a heap He simply scoops it up and starts again. For some reason He is really committed to the process. Thank the Lord!

A little joke that God pulled on me was that He led me to become one of those creatures that I most despised, a wimpy preacher. It was not only a joke on me but on the congregations I led. Poor congregations! Let me express my thoughts about being a preacher: (a) It’s the greatest privilege and the most important job in the world, or (b) It’s a sham and a fraud and a deception. Whether (a) or (b) is true depends on whether Jesus Christ is who the Bible declares him to be and, of course, on whether the Bible is true or false.

Christian preachers declare to people not only how to live a fulfilling life here on earth (Jesus called it the abundant life), but how to go to heaven for eternity rather than to hell.

That’s pretty important, wouldn’t you say?

WHY THEY HATED JESUS, **AND WHY THEY HATE US**

Jesus brought to people an amazing message of love, so why did they hate him so much? And they did hate him. King Herod tried to kill him when he was a baby. The first time he preached to a crowd, at his hometown of Nazareth, the congregation became filled with rage and pushed him outside the synagogue and tried to throw him off the cliff. (When I read that story it makes me feel nostalgic for some of my church experiences.) On more than one occasion when Jesus was preaching to a crowd they took up stones and wanted to stone him to death. They hated Jesus so much that at the end they cursed him, slapped him, spit on him, pulled out his beard, whipped him until he was almost unrecognizable, nailed his hands and feet to a cross, mocked and ridiculed him as he was dying, and thrust a spear in his side and up into his heart to make sure he was dead.

They not only hated Jesus, they hated anyone who was his follower and treated them the same way. All of the apostles died as martyrs except John who was exiled to a prison island and wrote the book of Revelation. Jesus told them plainly on his last night with them in the Upper Room that they were going to be hated and murdered for his sake (John 16). Jesus had also warned them earlier of the horrific cost of being a Christ-follower. He said they would be hated by their brother Jews and by the pagan Gentiles and even by members of their own families. (Read Matthew 10 and think about what Jesus said.) Jesus’ invitation to follow him has an innate warning of the cost involved: *“Take up your cross and follow me.”* The cost has not abated. You may know that the Chinese Communist government under Xi Ping has doubled down on its persecution of Christians. They are burning churches, putting pastors and small-group leaders in prison, seizing property, beating and threatening anyone who dares admit to being a Christian. A missionary who lives a hidden life in China recently visited our prayer group, and he said these things are really happening.

So I ask again, why did they hate Jesus so much, and why do they hate us for believing in Him?

- 1) They hated Jesus because he claimed to be God. Seventeen times in the book of John he claimed to pre-exist with God before the creation of the world. *He was in the beginning with God; I came down from heaven to give life to the world; I proceeded and came forth from God; etc.* This was blasphemy to the Jews..... unless it was true.
- 2) They hated Jesus because he claimed to be the way, the only way to God. *No one comes to the Father but by me.... I am the Bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world..... I am the door to God.*
- 3) They hated him because he said that all their piety and prayers and Bible reading and giving and church-going were for nothing unless they accepted him and his teachings. **NOTE: THIS IS SO IMPORTANT.** On one occasion, in John chapter 8, Jesus addresses a group of Jews who considered themselves to be children of Abraham and faithful followers of God. The Bible even says in John 8:31 that they were people *“Who believed in Him (in Jesus).”* But

apparently they had a mental belief in Jesus but not a heart belief because Jesus accused them of being “*children of the devil*” and God-haters. Why was Jesus so hard on those people? Why was he accusing them with such harsh words? He explains: *If God were your Father, you would love me, because I have come to you from God. I am not here on my own, but he sent me.* (John 8:42-43) They proved Jesus’ point by accusing Him of being an illegitimate child; they also accused Him of being demon possessed; and then they took up stones to kill Him.

Friends, this is extreme! It was extreme in Jesus’ day and it is extreme today. We live in a time when it is popular and admirable for people to be “spiritual” if they believe in the New Age or Buddhism or yoga or Eckancar or Harry Potter witchcraft or reincarnation or universalism or a Christianity without repentance and holiness. However, if people hear about Jesus Christ but reject him and his teachings they are God haters according to the Bible.

During the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabus as reported in Acts 13, they traveled to the town of Antioch in present day Turkey and were having great success in preaching the Gospel, especially to the Gentiles in town. Big crowds were coming to hear them preach. But the Jews in town got jealous, and Verse 50 says: *Then the Jews stirred up the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabus and ran them out of town.* These “influential religious women” are called in other translations, “the pious women” or “the devout women.” Those were the church-going women, the praying and Bible-study women. They were known as the Godly women in town, but in their hearts they hated God as shown by their hatred of Jesus Christ and those who preached about him.

Some people asked Jesus one time, *What kind of good things should we do to please God, to make us acceptable to God?* Jesus answered, *This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom God sent.* (John 6:28-29) Whoa! That’s a heavy word.

4) They hated Jesus and hate us because his way seems narrow and exclusive. We live in a day when “tolerance” is the most sacred word in American culture. Jesus exemplified tolerance. He loved sinners: Zaccheus the tax collector, the woman taken in adultery, etc. He loved pagans and people of other religions: the Syro-Phoenecian woman, the Roman officer whose slave was sick, the Samaritan woman at the well. But Jesus was intolerant of other ways to approach God than through the Door, the ladder into heaven, the Son of God himself. *For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity – the man Christ Jesus.* (1 Tim. 2:5)

5) They hate us because some denominations and churches and individual Christians don’t look or act like the Jesus we see in the Bible. They are prideful and act arrogant and superior. They constantly judge and criticize the actions of the people around them rather than love and serve them.

- 6) They hated Jesus because while he loved sinners he hated sin. He loved and accepted the Samaritan woman who had been married five times, but he told her to “*Go and sin no more.*” Because sin destroys people. God can’t be tolerant of something that is killing and destroying the people he loves. This is so important that I will address it in the following article.

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REPENT, AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS!

I’ve been a follower of Christ (a very inconsistent follower) for some 62 years. Good night, nurse, that’s a long time! There have been a lot of church folks that I have known during that period that did not understand that “repentance of sin” is a part of God’s prescription for being a believer, a follower of Christ, a Christian. In an earlier era, preachers may have pounded on their sheep about this subject, but I think that the pendulum has swung back to such an imbalance that preachers are afraid of offending folks if they teach them that they must not just “believe,” but “repent and believe.”

John the Baptizer is described in the Bible as the “forerunner” of the Messiah, the one sent by God to “prepare the way” for Him to come on the scene. And what was John’s ministry about? Matthew says, *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.”* (Matt. 3:1-3 NKJV) You may recall that the Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means “to change your mind.” God invites us, commands us to repent of our sin, singular, and of our sins, plural. Our sin is that we are totally focused on self, on our desires and pleasures, with no thought or consideration of God or His desires for us. The prophetic call to return to God involves total reorientation from pride and self-centeredness to a focus on God. Needless to say, we can’t do this perfectly and, in fact, can’t do it even imperfectly without the grace and assistance of the Lord.

In Jesus' parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8), He said, *There is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.* And His parable of the Prodigal Son was all about repentance: the younger brother who found himself in a pig-pen changed his mind and returned to his father. It was also about the elder brother, the prideful one, who stayed home and refused to repent and forgive. Repentance from self absorption, which is so stultifying and paralyzing, is itself a gift of God, but we have to choose to be willing to turn away from gazing in fascination at our own image, like Narcissus. We need to repent of our sin in order to be ready to receive the glorious present of Christ Himself.

But we also need to repent of our sins, plural. What might those sins be? They are spelled out in detail in the Bible in numerous places so we don't get deceived and confused. Read the following words very carefully, please:

Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols (such as love of money), or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people – none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

(1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

This teaching is reiterated in Galatians 5:19-21, which says:

When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

And in Ephesians chapter 5, which says:

You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshipping the things of this world. Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins, for the anger of God will fall on all who disobey him.

There is another list of sins in Colossians chapter 3, which adds: ***lying, and anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language.*** Colossians then encourages us to: ***Put on your new nature and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.***

There are other lists of sins and lists of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Hebrews, Timothy, etc.

In other words, God is saying to us loud and clear, "STOP MESSING WITH SIN AND MORAL FILTH AND UNFORGIVENESS AND HATRED AND LOVE OF MONEY AND LOVE OF THIS WORLD...AND TURN TO ME IN REPENTANCE. I LOVE YOU AND WILL HELP YOU LIVE LIKE A CHRISTIAN AND WILL GIVE YOU LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, AND SELF-CONTROL. I WILL BLESS YOUR FAMILY. I WILL GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM OF GOD WHICH INCLUDES LIVING WITH ME IN HEAVEN WHEN YOU DIE.

DON'T BE DECEIVED! IF YOU ARE LIVING LIKE THE DEVIL YOU BELONG TO THE DEVIL, YOU DON'T BELONG TO ME. I WILL NOT BE MOCKED. MY BLESSINGS ARE FOR THOSE WHO LAY DOWN THEIR LIVES AND LEARN TO LOVE AND OBEY ME. I LOVE YOU!

Heavenly Father"

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN,
AND WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING?

A Pastor shared this story by permission of a man in his church:

A man was raised in the church, but because of some things that had happened to him and his loved ones he turned away from God and the church. He was very angry with God and stayed away from Him and His people for over ten years. He became a bitter man and was very difficult to live with. His wife and children suffered a lot because of his attitude, but she kept praying that he would turn back into the man she had married. Finally, the man's conscience was hurting him, and he decided to go back to church and give God another try.

Of course, he talked to his wife about this decision, and on the next Sunday morning he started driving his family to church. But after a few miles he pulled over to the side of the road and sat there in silence gripping the steering wheel. His wife asked him what was going on. He said, "I'm afraid. What if He doesn't want me? What if He says, 'Where have you been? What have you been doing?'" His wife tried to assure him that God would not do that and that it would be OK. He finally got up the courage to go on to church.

After the sermon, the Pastor invited people to come down to the altar for prayer and the man slowly walked to the front. An old man known to be a man of prayer walked down the aisle, and he was weeping. He hugged the man and said, "God spoke to me very clearly just now. He said for me to tell you, 'I don't care where you have been, and I don't care what you have been doing. I just want my son back.'"

God Bless

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