

## LIFE'S TWO MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

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Acts 22:4-16

### INTRODUCTION

This has been a sad week with that massacre on Virginia Tech's campus taking 32 lives, being called the largest mass murder in the history of the U.S. As we've seen the grieving people, and all the talk of praying for those suffering such devastating loss, my pastoral heart wonders how many have a truly solid hope to cling to through such a time. Do they really know,

*The eternal God is your refuge,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deut 33:27)?*

I find it interesting that in a time like this, almost everyone talks about prayer and a belief that there is a heaven and that our lives are eternal. Even national news broadcasters, who usually shy away from anything Christian, unapologetically speak of prayer and "a better place" (meaning heaven). Along with that is the almost carte blanc assumption that almost everyone goes there. There are sentimental thoughts being given like, "let the angels guide you" and the traditional "rest in peace" regarding the deceased.

On the one hand, I see this as verifying what the Bible tells us about our creation. Eccl 3:11 says, *He [God] has also set eternity in the hearts of men.* We intuitively know that, especially when confronted with death. It is how we're made. And the questions of life and death are unfathomable and unanswerable apart from God.

On the other hand, while I know all the sentimental thoughts and assurances are well-meaning, as Christians, we have SO MUCH MORE. We can face that final hour knowing the personal promise of our risen Lord and Savior who says,

*"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. (Rev 1:17-18).*

I want everyone to know this with rock solid certainty in the depths of their hearts. But, only those who have personally chosen Jesus Christ as their Lord and are living for Him have this. For those belonging to Jesus, this is not a vague, heart-warming assurance and hope. They know to the core of their being that they are guaranteed salvation in heaven for all of eternity.

I love that opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism. It has questions assigned to each Lord's Day, a cycle of 52, covering a year. But this is where they saw it all beginning as these men hammered out this instructional tool in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Q. 1. "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

A. "That I belong— body and soul, in life and in death— not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has full paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil: that he

protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head: indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

I feel rather weary in my soul this morning of all the evil causes in our world. The day I was writing this sermon, another 250 died in Iraq– civilians killed by suicide bombers. Life is fragile. But Jesus came to rescue us from “this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). Because Jesus lives and has conquered death, we can live lives untouched by the fear of death.

My text this morning are the two questions the apostle Paul asked of Jesus that brought about his salvation. I think it is safe to say they are life’s two most important questions because our eternal salvation hinges upon our getting these two questions right. I’m using Paul’s summary of his conversion that he gives witness to in Jerusalem a number of years later. Let me set the scene. There has been a riot and they’ve tried to kill Paul because of all the people who are coming to know Christ through Paul’s preaching. The riot brings the Roman soldiers to arrest him and save his life. Paul asks to speak to the crowd from the steps of the barracks where he is being taken. It is a retelling of his conversion scene in Acts 9, but with these two questions highlighted in their importance for us. As Paul retells his conversion on the road to Damascus, remember, he is traveling there after just presiding over the murder of Stephen in Jerusalem, the church’s first martyr.

READ: 22:4-16

### “WHO ARE YOU, LORD?” (8)

A blinding light and the voice of Jesus from heaven, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* is followed by Paul’s question, *Who are you, Lord?* (Saul and Paul are the same person). And the answer from heaven, *I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.* The answer to Paul’s question is all Paul needs to know that everything Jesus said was true– He is God come to us in human flesh, just as He claimed. The proof is in the resurrection.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus forgave people their sins. Now, this is a ludicrous claim for any human being to make. When Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic, the Pharisees were indignant, saying, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Lk. 5:21). And, Jesus in essence said, “You got that right!” Then, to verify His authority and who He was, He commanded the paralytic to walk. Also, Jesus offered eternal life and guaranteed escape from hell to all who believed in Him– who put their full trust in Him (Jn. 3:16; 11:25-26). Now both of these claims, to forgive sins and give eternal life, are empty if Jesus is merely a great teacher or a mighty prophet from God. We all have to agree that no human being has that kind of authority or power. It only makes sense if Jesus is God.

Furthermore, Jesus says His death on the cross would pay a “ransom” (Mk. 10:45) to free us from the slavery our sin has sold us into. We all know that we are in bondage to sin. We end up doing what we know we shouldn’t do. Evil flourishes in our world because of this. We fall captive to the ploys of the devil. The power that sets us free is real– not just an inspiration to do better.

There is an actual inner transformation, a heart transplant, so everything changes— indeed, we are a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) no longer controlled by our passions or the power of the enemy. Now, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are free and overcomers. Only God can do this. Read the preaching of the apostles in the first chapters of Acts and that is their message. Jesus is risen from the dead and that is proof positive that what He said and who He claimed to be are all true. Therefore, Peter boldly proclaims,

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.* (Acts 4:12)

The answer to Paul’s question, *Who are you, Lord?*, in this blinding moment of his conversion reveals it all to Paul. In Jesus Christ alone is salvation. Jesus launches His ministry with two staccato imperatives, “Repent and believe!” (Mk. 1:15). Repent means to realize we are going the wrong way and turn around. That is exactly what Paul does here. And faith is given to Him to trust Christ alone for salvation.

The answer to this fundamental question is where we must all begin on this road to our salvation. To acknowledge that God has come to us in Jesus in order to save us is a beginning. But, we must make it our personal experience. We must act on it. The question for each of us is, “Is He our Lord and Savior?” For this to happen, it involves a decision we make at the center of our lives. We repent, we turn away from doing it our way, being our own lord. This vacating the control center involves a surrender on our part and an invitation to our risen Lord to come in and take control.

With that, we come to the second essential question.

### **“WHAT SHALL I DO?” (10)**

As Paul makes Jesus his Lord, then this question of obedience follows. While I mentioned the first two imperatives spoken by Jesus in the launch of His ministry, “repent and believe,” it is quickly followed by a third imperative, “follow me” (Mk. 1:17). As my brother writes in his most recent book, The Way of Jesus, “To follow Jesus is as much, or maybe even more, about feet as it is about ears and eyes.” Truth and action are all of one piece.

It is as Paul obeys, follows Jesus’ command, Acts 22:11

*“Get up... and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.”* (Acts 22:11)

that his sight is restored and his commission is given. I’m struck by that phrase, *all that you have been assigned to do*. This applies not only to Paul, but to each and every one who follows Jesus. We have a personal assignment. Of course, in following Jesus, we are committed to obeying all the instructions He has already given us in His Word. However, in addition to that, each individual has a calling to fulfill.

The Master has a special assignment just for you that applies to every part of your life. Thus, the controlling question in all the decisions of our lives needs to be, “What is Jesus wanting here?” When you are looking for a marriage partner; when you are considering a career; when you are

trying to decide which college to go to; when you are considering a change in jobs; when you are deciding about a vacation; when you are thinking about retirement– and absolutely everything in our lives– it should be approached with prayerful relinquishment to the Master, trying to discern His will for us, what He has “assigned us to do.”

The other day, I was talking to someone in the church who had applied for another job. It seemed the perfect job. He was well qualified and was chosen. Then through some political maneuvering at headquarters, he was then denied the job. It was all terribly devious, unfair, and wrong motives were behind the denial. But, this person had subjected the whole process to prayer, and at the end, rather than reacting with anger and bitterness at the injustice, was able to let it all go with the sure knowledge that it was not the Master’s assignment for him.

There is a wonderful peace in that assurance. If you are following the assignment of the all-powerful Lord of the universe, we have incredible security. As David prays in Ps. 56:11, after being captured by enemy forces,

*in God I trust; I will not be afraid.  
What can man do to me?*

Indeed, what can mere humans with their plots and evil deeds do to us who belong to the Lord?

As we answer these two questions right, we enter into the way of Jesus that grants us new power for living right now no matter what the present circumstances are we face. Do you really know who Jesus is? Have you made Him your Lord and Savior? Have you turned the control of your life over to Him and pledged to follow Him?

## **CONCLUSION**

The House of the Hapsburgs had ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire since 1273 until W.W.I. It had been part of the Holy Roman Empire and a major political power in Europe for almost 650 years. When the Emperor Franz-Josef I of Austria died in November of 1916, it was the last of the grandiose imperial funerals staged.

The Hapsburgs are buried in the family crypt underneath the Capucin Monastery of Vienna. On the day of the funeral, the entire court assembled in full white dress, their hats covered with ostrich plumes. A military band played somber dirges and an anthem by Hayden. The cortege followed a horse-drawn carriage, drawn by six black horses. Reaching the monastery, the coffin draped in the imperial colors of black and gold, was borne down the long staircase, illumined with flaming torches, until it arrived at the huge iron doors of the crypt. Behind the doors stood the Cardinal-Archbishop of Vienna along with his entourage of high church officials. The Court Marshall, in charge of the procession, then approached the closed doors. In a ceremony prescribed and followed for many centuries, he pounded on the door with the hilt of his ceremonial sword, commanding, “Open!”

From inside the crypt, the Cardinal calls back, “Who goes there!”

The Court Marshall responds, “We bear the remains of His Imperial and Apostolic Majesty,

Franz-Josep I, by the Grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand Duke of Lombardy, Venezia, Stygia....” and so on through the 37 titles ascribed to the emperor.

The Cardinal calls back, “We know him not.”

Another knock and a responding, “Who goes there?” from the Cardinal beyond the door.

Now, the Grand Marshall uses a very abbreviated title, allowed only in dire emergencies– when the 37 titles would just take too long. “We bear the remains of His Majesty, Franz-Josef I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary.”

And again, “We know him not.”

Now, a third knock and an answering, “Who goes there?”

“We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like us all!” [and I would add, trusting in Christ alone for salvation]. Whereupon, the massive doors swung slowly open and Franz-Josef was borne within.

As I picture those huge iron doors swinging open, I hear the voice of my mother singing a song she often was asked to sing at funerals, referring to Jesus opening the gates of heaven:

“He the pearly gates will open,  
So that I may enter in;  
For He purchased my redemption,  
And forgave me all my sin.”

At the end, when death comes, titles, fame, accomplishments, wealth and power all cease to be relevant. What matters is what you’ve done with Jesus. As Paul summarizes it in one sentence to the Philippian jailor, *Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved* (Acts 16:31). This is an affirmation that Jesus is God, our Savior, and rightful Lord.

As we close, I want to come back to that question I used earlier, the first question from the Heidelberg Catechism, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” We draw comfort from many things in this life– our homes, cars, possessions, friends, family, food and on and on. But, there is only one place in this life of ultimate comfort that will never fail us. It is a choice we must make. And, if Jesus Christ is not your comfort in life, He will not be your comfort in death. I’d like us to affirm this in the words of the Catechism– printed at the end of the hymn on the bulletin insert.

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Now, I want to give you a chance reaffirm your baptismal vows. I’m feeling weary of evil and

the power of evil in our world today. These ancient renunciations and affirmations used by the church at baptism feel right for a time like this. You may not have used these exact vows at your baptism, or you may not have been baptized yet, but these are good ones and if they reflect your heart, I encourage you to join in them. Baptism is only done once in our faith tradition, but reaffirming those promises is encouraged in our Book of Order.

Then, after our hymn of commitment to following Jesus, you will have a chance if the Spirit so moves your heart, to come to the baptismal font and touch the waters— remembering your baptism or anticipating your baptism. Is there something you need to let go of— a sin, or something of the old self that is controlling you? Is there an obedience Jesus is calling you to? In touching the water, let go of whatever you need to let go of to be covered by the sanctified waters of baptism— buried, dead, and gone. Then ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with the resurrection power of the new life in Christ.

Listen to the words of Paul in Romans 6 when he talks about baptism,

*What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (1-4)*

*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires (12)  
...For sin shall not be your master (14)*