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The Case of the Missing Cross

301

Series: Miscellaneous Messages

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The Case of the Missing Cross

THE ESSENCE

It was a most unusual experiment. Picture a glass house, thirty feet long, thirty feet wide, thirty feet high. A glass cube, it was, totally sealed and self-contained, except for a tiny door at one end. In that door was a small lock. The lock could be opened by anyone who had the appropriate key, a simple, Cross-shaped piece of metal, which when placed in the slot on the right of the door, would open and allow them to go in, but no one to get out.

Inside the cube were dozens of monkeys. At the onset of the experiment, there were five hundred monkeys, all on the outside. Each had placed around its neck, a gold chain, and on that chain was one of the Cross-shaped keys that would, if placed in the opening on the door, gain them admission. The air inside the cube was perfect. The exact amount of oxygen needed was always present, and there were always the right amounts and kinds of food to keep the critters happy.

Only a handful of the monkeys had found their way inside. The rest were content to stay outside where the air was substandard and there was no good food. In other words, those on the outside were slowly dying. And all of them had what it took to enter. Those on the inside, well fed and cared for, were energetic, alert, playful, and strong. Those on the outside, though they did not have the energy to do so, would constantly try to imitate their happy friends; but of course, it was a weak imitation.

As time went on, the outside monkeys began to get sick and die. Soon a kind of panic ensued, with those who remained trying desperately to get into the glass cube, but not through the door. They would pound on the walls; try jumping on the glass roof, or even butt their heads against the glass door. Only one or two bothered to use the Cross-shaped key that gained them entrance to real life. The rest just tried to imitate the living while preparing to die.

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What makes the experiment so interesting, of course, is that it is so much like real life. There is, in this difficult, dying world we live in, a “safe house” where those who have come to God His way are kept by the power of His love. They are safe, secure, and cared for, and they are experiencing life.

On the outside are many others who actually have been invited in, even have the key to enter in, yet rather than come in by the door, either bang their heads against the wall trying to get inside some other way or stay outside, mimicking those on the inside, as though by behaving as they do, they will somehow become like them. The end result is that they are dying, and don't even know it.

The sad truth is that every one of those monkeys fit in one of two categories. Either they are dying a slow death or guaranteed a special kind of life. Not one of them is in between. But somehow those outside begin to delude themselves into thinking that if they can act enough like those on the inside, and pretend to be happy, it will all turn out okay. And the world today is filled with people who are outside the kingdom of God, certain that the best they can do is imitate those inside and hope for the best.

But they are missing something. That something is called “life”. They possess no power; no confidence; no peace. Many of them live active religious lives, preaching, teaching, serving. Some of them have exemplary moral character. And yet in their heart of hearts, there is a missing ingredient. And the absence of that ingredient makes the entire life they live a frustrating charade. They are on the outside “imitating” Christianity...trying to look like and act like and serve like one who would fit the biblical example of a child of God. They believe there is a God; so much so that they try to serve Him with all their being. They believe that there is a Jesus Christ, God's Son, and they even believe that He died for the sins of all mankind.

What's missing you ask? Why do they only act like Christians? Why is there no real divine energy to make it work? If we were mystery writers we would call it “The Case of the Missing Cross”. They have all of the ingredients necessary but one. And that one is the only ingredient necessary. They have become “Christianized”, but have never become Christians. They have read God's word and heard God's word and seen God's people and tried to imitate God in their own energy as if, by trying hard enough, they would

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impress God, who would grant them entrance into the glass cube of eternity. They are frustrated and uncertain. They are weary. They are lost. Because they are trying to do what God has already done. And that, Beloved, makes everything they do sin.

You may be one of those people. You may feel as though you have found the church you've always dreamed of: good sermons, active people, friendly atmosphere, lots of teaching. And you feel that you have finally found the kingdom of God. Beloved, it is not a church you are looking for. It is a Cross. Churches can point you to that Cross, but unless you take the key God has provided and open the only door that will enter eternity, you will come to the end of your journey of life weary from imitation, longing for transformation, and hopelessly estranged from the very God you have been endeavoring to serve.

There is only one way to become a Christian. You must come by way of the Cross. That Cross, what it stands for, and what it means to us is the subject of today's message.

The Apostle Paul was a man of elegant simplicity. He spoke with clarity, detail, and wisdom. But because The Holy Spirit was using his hand to pen God's words, He spoke as well with words so simple a child could understand. Here was his two-line explanation of the gospel:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

(I Corinthians 15:1,3,4 NKJV)

There you have it. All that God has to say to man about salvation wrapped up in a package so small most men and women miss it.

The Cross = life.

That is the divine formula of eternity. We try to complicate it and we try to avoid it, and there is a reason for that. Once again, Paul gave us that reason. He said:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

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For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;
but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling
block and to the Greeks foolishness,
but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ
the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(I Corinthians 1:21-24 NKJV)

The Cross wasn't enough for the Jew. He was looking for a visit from God like the cloud in the wilderness so theologians could accept it. It wasn't enough for the Greek. He wanted an intellectual solution to the problems of man that was complicated enough to require philosophers to untangle it. Neither could fathom something this simple: sin, a substitute, a Savior, a solution. Nothing could be that easy. Or could it?

That is the question that has haunted man for 2,000 years. It has spawned cults and caused denominations and Christian churches to add and subtract and divide truth in order to devise a doctrine that required something that needed either clergy or works to fulfill their goals and lead men to God. There just had to be more, they argued, so they concocted more.

There is nothing more. The Gospel is so simple a child can understand it, and yet so profound that the most learned intellect in the world cannot fathom it apart from divine revelation. Paul said,

for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who
believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

(Romans 1:16b NKJV)

THE ISSUES

Why can't we just accept the simple gospel? Why is it that we strive so to complicate something that God made so clear? There are four issues involved. This will be a very simple message. We will not endeavor to impress you with fancy words or complicated doctrines. We just want to look at the issues as Paul did, and be sure everyone listening understands.

The One-Way Dilemma

The first stumbling block that falls in our way is the one-way dilemma. We ask, "How could a loving God make salvation so limited?" How could those who are such faithful Buddhists or Muslims or Mormons be excluded? That, beloved, is why the

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Cross is such a stone of offense to so many. The answer is simple. It is found in God's Word.

For there is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, (I Timothy 2:5 NKJV)

One God—only one God. One mediator—only one mediator. You say, "I have a problem with that." Then you have a problem with God. He did not say, "There is probably only one God." He did not say, "There is one God who stands out above the rest." He said, "There is only one God. Period." And there is only one who can stand between that God and man—His name is Jesus.

Acts 4:12 adds:

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (NKJV)

No other. If you believe that God is a good God and Jesus was a good man, but that there are many ways to get to heaven, you have defied the Living God in your heart and called Him a liar. There is only one God, there is only one mediator, and there is no other name; no other way to get to heaven but by Him.

In John 14:6, Jesus said this:

"I am the [only] way, the [only] truth, and the [only way to get] life. No one comes to the Father except [unless He comes] through Me." (John 14:6 NKJV)

So either Jesus is a fraud, or He is God. He not only claims to be God, He claims to be the only way to The Father. Don't say He's just a good man. He can't be. Good men don't lie. If someone came in here this morning and stood up and said, "I am God", you wouldn't call him to be your Pastor, or nominate him for President based on his integrity and His wisdom. You'd call him an imposter. So don't pretend to be interested in Jesus Christ as a way to heaven. He's not. Either He's The way to heaven, or He's the biggest liar who ever walked this earth. Take your pick. No options in between.

That's the first problem men and women have with the simple Gospel. Too narrow? Too simple? It doesn't give any choices. Yes it does; it gives two. Say "yes" or say "no". Say nothing and you've said "no". And it solves the wonderment that plagues so many about eternity. Everyone who is "In Christ" is in the cube of eternity; everyone who is "anything or anywhere else" is not. God

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just wanted to make it simple enough that no one could make a mistake. He wanted everyone who ever lived to know whether or not they were going to heaven. If they belonged to Christ, they were. If not, they weren't. How much simpler could He have made it? There is only one way to God—through Jesus Christ. There is only one way to Jesus Christ—by way of the Cross. Either you recognize a need for deliverance from sin or you don't. If you do, you recognize that either Jesus died for you or He didn't. If you know He did, you either choose to accept His free gift on your behalf and ask Him to do what He came to do, (save you) or you don't. If you do, He will. If you have, He did. Case closed. One way. That's enough. And that's all.

What difference does it make?

The second issue to confront the seeker and confirm the simple gospel is the question, "What difference does it make?" How different is the Christian from the non-Christian? We can all sit together in a sanctuary, sing the same songs, do the same things, and nobody knows who is and who isn't a Christian. And chances are you can work in an office and be virtually unaware of who are, and who aren't believers. To be sure we understood how important the simple gospel is, Jesus used two distinct illustrations over and over and over to describe it. The first, and perhaps the most essential one, is the difference between being dead or alive.

In John 3:36, Jesus made this amazing statement:

"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (NKJV)

In John 11:25,26 He added:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.

And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (NKJV)

Jesus very plainly said that the difference between those who were His and those who were not, was a matter of life and death. Now if you like experiments, go out to a local cemetery tomorrow, and try to decide if there is any difference between being dead and alive. And don't tell me you can't tell the difference. Christianity, then, is not an addendum to a "good life". It isn't something you

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do to “add meaning to life”. It is something you do to a dead spirit to make it come alive. And until you do, it won’t. Church membership doesn’t make a bit of difference. Good works don’t count at all. Religious activities are of no value whatever if you’re dead. And unless you have asked God to make you come alive in Christ, you’re dead. You don’t add on to death.

Go to the garage tomorrow and tow a car that has no motor. Tell the mechanic you want the air conditioner fixed. He’ll laugh at you. Tell him to change the air filter. He’ll ask you when you slipped a fan belt. Tell him you want the tires rotated. He’ll say “Why?” If it can’t run, why do things to it that doesn’t matter if it don’t? And you may say to me today, “My biggest problem is my marriage”. And I may ask you, “Have you ever given your life to Christ”. You say “No”. Then your marriage isn’t your biggest problem. You’re dead. Now that’s a problem. Until you come to life in Christ, solving your marriage will only complicate your deadness. You’ll revel in your marriage and think you’re alive, when you’re not. You’re fixing the air conditioner, but the car won’t run. Life or death. That’s the issue.

The second illustration Jesus used over and over was that of light and darkness. Jesus said in John 8:12,

“I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.” (NKJV)

In John 12:46, He said,

“I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.” (NKJV)

Ephesians 5:8 adds,

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (NKJV)

In I Peter 2:9 Peter wrote

[God] called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (NKJV)

In I John 1:5 we read,

...God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (NKJV)

Now don’t tell me you can’t tell the difference between darkness and light. Take a crowded auditorium and turn off all the lights, and sheer panic ensues. No one can see. No one can tell where they are going. No one knows where their loved ones

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are. Darkness brings utter chaos and fear. But Jesus said that if you fail to come to Him on His terms, you walk in darkness. But, He added, if you become a Christian, you possess the Light of the world, and will never live in darkness again. Death... life? Darkness...light? A little difference? No, Beloved, being a Christian means total transformation in heaven and internal transformation on earth. It is so pronounced that it's as easy to know whether or not you are a believer as it is to know whether or not you are alive; to know whether or not you are walking in total darkness or wonderful light.

I'm working on it...I'm almost a Christian.

No you're not. You're not almost a Christian anymore than those bodies in the cemetery are "almost alive". Not anymore than those confused monkeys who thought that because they could act like those inside the cube, they were okay. There aren't any "almost" Christians. There aren't any "nearly saved" ones. Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, He cannot see the Kingdom of heaven." Now I have a new granddaughter. I have 700 photographs of her in every conceivable situation; bathing, cooing, crying, yawning. She's the light of my life. Don't ask me if I think she's alive. The minute I heard her cry, I knew. The minute I saw her eat, I knew. She is alive. She has been born.

And if you have been born from above, you are a Christian. If you haven't, you aren't. Not because God doesn't love you; not because you're not moral or faithful or trustworthy or kind. To be born again you must realize that your sinfulness has separated you from a holy God and nothing short of a total transformation will do anything to restore that fellowship. But you can't do it. You have "come short of the glory of God". So God did it for you. He sent His son to die in your place, so you can live forever. Ask Him, and He'll forgive you and cleanse you and you will be "born from above, born again".

Born again, incidentally, is a biblical phrase. Jesus used it. It means to instantly be made new by a supernatural act of a supernatural God. It is a finished act. Therefore, either you have been or you haven't. Either you are a Christian or you aren't. And the difference is the difference between death and life; night and day. So you'll know for sure. God wants you to know. Which brings us to the fourth issue:

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Can we really know for sure?

God answers clearly, not only can you, you must. Can you imagine walking up to someone on the street and saying “I beg your pardon sir, but do you think you’re alive?” Just read the little book of I John. Over and over it used that phrase:

Now by this we know that we know Him, (I John 2:3a NKJV)

By this we know that we are in Him. (I John 2:5c NKJV)

but we know that when He is revealed, (I John 3:2c NKJV)

And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. (I John 3:19 NKJV)

By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. (I John 4:13 NKJV)

We know that we are of God, (I John 5:19a NKJV)

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God. (I John 5:13 NKJV)

We know...we know...we know...we know. That’s the crux of our assurance. Christianity isn’t a lottery. You don’t buy a chance and hope God calls your number. Christianity isn’t a sporting event. You don’t play the best you can with the hope of making the team. Christianity isn’t a social club. You don’t assume you belong because your family did. Christianity is a gift. Either you take it or you don’t. If you do, you will be “born again”. You’ll know. God’s Spirit will indwell you and convict you of sin. You’ll know. God’s Word will come alive and make sense to you. You’ll know. God’s people will become your family and you will know you have passed from death to life because you love the brethren. You’ll know. God doesn’t drug you and wake you up in heaven saved. You’ll know. Maybe yours won’t be a Damascus Road experience like Paul’s, with blinding lights and deep emotions; maybe it will simply be a quiet acknowledgment before God of your sins and a humble invitation for Him to come into your life. Doesn’t matter. You’ll know. And if you don’t know, don’t assume. Just because you come to church and enjoy it, don’t assume. You may go to the opera and enjoy the music, but that doesn’t make you a singer. You don’t become a Christian by being around Christians, anymore than those monkeys entered the cube by imitating those inside. You must enter in. You must be born again. And if you have been, you’ll know. If you don’t

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know, don't assume anything. Come to Christ and be sure. Then you'll know.

THE APPLICATION

Which brings us to the application portion of this message. There are three points.

The Church

Application number one: The church. It applies to all churches everywhere. The application for the church is three fold, as well. The Case of The Missing Cross is affecting the ministries, the message, and the mission of the body of Christ. The church in our day has unconsciously tailored its ministries, messages, and mission endeavors to the perceived needs of the world, rather than to the stated needs of the world, based on the word of God. We are teaching Christian principles, Christian policies, and Christian politics to dead people, wondering why they don't respond. And if they do, we assume they're alive, but they are responding to principles, rather than to a Person.

Counseling is important. It is vital. Discipleship is important. It is essential. Education is important. You can't do without it. Fellowship is important. It's the strength of the body. But, beloved you can't counsel a dead man. You can't disciple someone who doesn't yet have the Holy Spirit. You can't educate a lost man, because the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, neither indeed can he because they are spiritually discerned. The best illustration, I believe, is still that of a radio. Let's assume you have a favorite FM station. It plays the music you like, but you only have an AM radio. You twist the dial and nothing happens. So you take that radio to the other room, thinking if you get closer to the signal, it might work. Or you buy a big antenna and hook it up the to the back, and you work the dial back and forth, but nothing happens. So you paste a sign on it that says "FM". That ought to do it. Nope, still no FM music. You even buy a switch to mount on the back that says AM-FM. and you turn the switch. But, beloved, that radio isn't equipped to pick up the signal. So you can beat on it, twist its dials till they come off, move it, turn it on its side, or re-label it, it's still an AM radio. Something has to be changed inside before it can receive the right signals.

Evangelism must come before discipleship. Birth must come before growth. Salvation must come before transformation can

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take place. You can counsel an unbeliever on how to have a happy marriage, using Christian principles, but there are three problems.

1- They can't understand the principles; they don't have God's Spirit to interpret them.

2- If they understand superficially, they can't consistently obey; they don't have God's Spirit to empower them.

3- If the enemy cooperates and their marriage is saved, they may think they've found the answer: Christian principles. If so, they are worse off than before. What would it profit them to have a good marriage and lose their own soul?

In these last days, the church is operating with blurred distinctives. It thinks that by addressing the social and moral and political issues of the day, it can change the world. It's suffering from the delusion that accompanies "The Case of the Missing Cross." Only one thing can change the world: a personal, individual encounter with The Living God through Jesus Christ, His Son. It must happen one person at a time. As God changes men and women on the inside, this world may or may not change on the outside. It may be too late for this nation; for this world; but it's not too late for that visitor in the pew, that neighbor, that co-worker. The ministries of the church must focus on the Cross. The message of the church must begin at the Cross. The mission of the church must prioritize the Cross. Except a man be born again, He cannot, he cannot, he cannot enter the Kingdom. If he cannot, we must not pretend he can. We enter into accountability for his lost condition.

The Christian

Secondly, the Christian. So many of us have become so comfortable in our Christian cocoons, we think that by being in church, or studying, or going to seminars or reading books or listening to tapes, we're bringing in the Kingdom. Meanwhile, all about us are people who are dying and on their way to an eternal hell, separated from the Living God. We're so busy being Christians, and being with Christians, and doing Christian things, we forget that we were put here to "go into all the world and preach the gospel, baptizing, and then teaching."

Everyone you meet tomorrow is in one of two conditions: saved or lost. Everyone you pass on the street on your way home

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either lives in darkness or light. Everyone in your block either will spend eternity in the presence of the Living God or separated from God for all eternity. No one..no one..no one...is in between. Everyone who has not been born again by accepting the free gift of the shed blood of Jesus on Calvary is lost and on his or her way to hell. You say, "Don't talk like that". Why not? Jesus did. He said,

but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

(Luke 13:3b NKJV)

That's the gospel. But they don't need to perish.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:

(John 1:12 NKJV)

That's the gospel, too.

If you had a cure for death, and you could walk into a cemetery tomorrow and speak the right words and the dead would rise up out of their graves and come alive, would you refuse to do so because you didn't want to offend the grounds keeper? Because you were afraid you might be embarrassed if someone saw you? If you held the keys to life and death, would you bury them because you didn't have time to raise the dead? God forbid.

Christian, you do hold the keys to life and death. Ezekiel said "If you see the enemy coming, and blow not the trumpet, their blood is on your hands". (Ezekiel 33:6) If we hold in our hands the Word of life and the world around us is dying because we've never told them they don't have to die, how can we live with ourselves? How can we say we are fulfilling the great commission, if we are too busy Christianizing society to show people how to become Christians? If you have lost friends, don't teach them how a Christian lives, teach them what a Christian is...and ask them to become one. They can't grow without being born; they can't walk without the Light; they can't bear fruit without being connected to the vine. Except a man be born again, He cannot. Memorize that verse. It will change your concept of evangelism.

The Crisis

Which brings us to the crisis. The crisis is that anytime you share God's good news to a group of people, there are dozens, maybe hundreds who can identify with the reality that they have been Christianized, but they are not Christians. Or maybe they

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simply think they are, but don't know for sure. The joy, the peace, the hunger for spiritual things has never really been there. You may be a Sunday School teacher, a preacher, or a chaplain; or you may be someone who has never even been interested in spiritual things. In either case, the issue is clear. There is only one way to get to God, and that is through Jesus Christ. There is only one way to come to Christ: by way of that offensive, uncomfortable stumbling block known as the Cross. It takes away all of your good works and good intentions and preconceived concepts of finding God and lets God find you. It takes all of your wisdom and all of your strength and makes it of no effect. It takes your predetermined rejection of the concept of sin and displays it on the screen of life as incorrect.

You are a sinner.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
(Romans 3:23 NKJV)

All. You. Me. All of us.

There is none righteous, no, not one; (Romans 3:10 NKJV)

That sin has separated you from your God. The wages that sin pays its slaves is separation from God [spiritual death].

For the wages of sin is death, (Romans 6:23a NKJV)

You can't do anything to earn back God's favor.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

(Ephesians 2:8,9 NKJV)

but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
(Romans 6:23b NKJV)

It is free. You can't pay for it. You can't earn it. You can't deserve it. You can only receive it.

If you had a terminal disease, and you knew it; and your doctor came to you and said, "I have found a cure. You don't need to die. I have the one medicine that will guarantee you life. And it's free. It's been donated without cost for you to take. Here, take it and live!"

Would you answer that Doctor, "I'll think about it; I want to study the molecular structure of the medicine awhile to be sure I concur with its content"? Or would you say, "I don't feel like

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taking medicine right now, it might have side effects.” Or “My dad took medicine, I shouldn’t have to,” or “I go to the pharmacy every week and walk around; that should do it.” Or “It can’t be any good if it’s free. I don’t trust anything that cheap.” Or “There are bound to be other medicines; I’ll try them first, then I’ll get back to you.”

The doctor would shake his head in disbelief and walk away grieved and broken hearted. He would have offered you the only thing that could have saved you, and you would have given him in return useless excuses while you knowingly chose death over life.

My friend, if you are not a Christian, you have the only terminal illness known to man. All cancer can do is rush you into the arms of Jesus. Sin can kill you. And until you come to Christ by way of the blessed Cross and receive His free gift, you have been given a guaranteed prognosis. Chances of survival without taking the cure is 0%. Survival with the cure is 100%. The price has already been paid. Jesus Christ went to Calvary Pharmacy on your behalf, and charged it to His account.

All you have to do today is acknowledge that you are dying of the disease of sin, hopelessly, terminally separated from life, and listen to the Great Physician as He whispers,

I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (John 10:10b NKJV)

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine [fellowship] with him, and he with Me.

(Revelation 3:20 NKJV)

Would you like to fellowship with God for all eternity?

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3b NKJV)

we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.

(II Corinthians 5:20b NKJV)

Be reconciled today.

If you have never received Christ as Savior, or you are not sure, you can ask Him to come into your life right now. The issues are these:

1- Acknowledge that you are a sinner.

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- 2- Acknowledge that your sins have offended a holy God and separated you from Him.
- 3- Acknowledge that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died to set you free, to reconcile you to God by paying the price for your sins; the guiltless for the guilty; the sinless for the sinner.
- 4- Ask Him to forgive you of your sins, and tell Him you accept His gift as payment for all your transgressions.
- 5- Ask Him to come into your life and begin to live His life in you.
- 6- He will.
- 7- Thank Him for doing so.

The gift is His. The choice is yours.

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