

### ***“Making Life Work—Easter...”***

And Sunday’s here! Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day, just like he said he would, he came back from the dead!

What is all this about? This day, Easter. It’s a big deal, why? Jesus put it this way, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17, NIV)**. In other words, God wanted life to work, really work for you and me. And today, Easter Sunday, we start a new series of messages all about making life work. Today we just set the foundation of God’s desire to make life work, next week we really dig in looking at the book of Proverbs, God’s timeless wisdom that he’s given to us to us so that our relationships, our careers, our families are everything they can possibly be.

You see, God has always wanted a deep connection with people. Always. God has always loved the world and wanted to be in connection with you and me. But he gave us the ability to choose. He gave me a free will to make my own decisions so that I could choose to be in relationship with him or not, so that I could choose to love him or not. We all know that if love isn’t freely chosen, it isn’t really love. God wanted me and you to choose to be in relationship with him. He’s always been inviting us, always whispering to us, even when we don’t believe he exists. Why? He wants the best for us and our one and only lives here, and forever with him in eternity.

Because we human beings can choose, we make life hard. We make bad decisions and life doesn’t work. But God has been trying to help us have lives that work. He’s been giving human beings all kinds of ways to reconnect with him. And the ultimate expression of God’s desire for every human being to connect with them is what happened on the cross and what happened in the resurrection--Easter.

But to really get all this it helps to back up and see what God’s been up to in the past to help us, his children, have lives that work, lives that are in sync with him, lives that are in relationship with him.

I want to share with you something from pastor Bill Hybels calls the Crimson Thread. The Crimson Thread is the story of sacrifice woven throughout the entire Bible. I believe that it begins with the story of the Exodus. This is the time when the Jews were slaves in Egypt. God sends the plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the Jews go. Pharaoh doesn’t respond to the first nine plagues, so God sends a tenth. It’s a horrible plague. The angel of death will visit every home in all the land and slay the firstborn child in every family...that is unless they take the blood of an innocent, unblemished lamb and sprinkle that blood around their doors. If they don’t take the blood of that innocent and sprinkle it on their doors, the angel of death will take the life of the first born. But if they do, the angel of death will pass over that house.

Can you imagine some 16-year-old boy wondering what his dad is doing when he grabs a lamb out of the pen? “Dad what are doing with that lamb?” “I’m going to kill it, Son.” “But Dad, what did the lamb do?!” “The lamb is going to be a sacrifice.” “But Dad, what did the lamb do?!” “The lamb didn’t do anything, but it’s going to lose its life so that you don’t lose yours.” “Kill the lamb, Dad.”

Again, you can visualize that son standing by very soberly, saying, “You mean it’s either the lamb or me? It’s either the innocent third party is slain, or I receive judgment?”

Later on the Old Testament we see the crimson thread as the sacrificial system is put into effect. All kinds of sacrifices are instituted. God specifies the need for grain offerings, and drink offerings, and incense offerings, and sin offerings. Then there’s the Day of Atonement. That’s the day that all the people gather together and confess their sins. They understood that there was a consequence for their sins. They say, “We are guilty of committing sins before a holy God!” Then the animal, the unblemished lamb, is slaughtered in front of the people and its blood soaks into the ground. The people see that their sins cost something. In that sacrifice there was a transference of guilt from the people onto the innocent animal and the innocent animal pays the price. And as the people would have watched that, it became clear that there was a cost to their sin. That was supposed to make you feel repentance. It was supposed to move you to say, “I don’t want to sin any more. I want to live a different kind of life. The cost is too great.” That lamb is the **sin sacrifice**, the substitute

for the punishment that the people should have received for their sins. The people all want to look away as the animals lose their lives. It's a horrible thing even to watch an animal die, isn't it?

We see the crimson thread in Isaiah 53. The prophet announces that another innocent, this time a human being, is going to be the ultimate sin sacrifice. **"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all"** (Isaiah 53:5-6, NIV).

In other words, he will become a guilt offering. The people started to say, "You mean, someday there will be a human sin sacrifice? Once and for all? One who will take upon himself the punishment intended for individuals."

**And then the crimson thread connects into the birth of Jesus.** The angels come and say, "A child is born this day and he is a savior!" "Call his name Jesus because he is going to save his people from their sins!" Jesus' name literally means, "God's salvation." He's going to be a sin sacrifice.

And then as Jesus grew older and started his ministry the crimson thread thickens. John the Baptist saw Jesus in a crowd of people. John came up to him and yelled, "Here is the Lamb of God!" He's using sacrificial language that the people understood. He says, "Here is the Lamb of God who will shed his blood, who will be slaughtered, the innocent Lamb of God who will shed his blood for the sins of the world."

Throughout Jesus' ministry he referred to himself as the Son of God who would be the sin sacrifice. He led a perfect life, so he was an innocent lamb. And on the cross he willingly shed his blood...and many people looked away. They may have said, "How can this be? How can an innocent sin sacrifice be slaughtered so that guilty parties like me can go free? How can it be?"

I wonder what it would have been like to stand at the foot of the cross and watch the innocent Lamb of God spill his blood. I think I would have collapsed into a pile, if I would have seen Jesus writhing in agony, his blood dripping into the ground. The innocent Lamb of God being a sin sacrifice so that a guilty party like me could go free.

**And the crimson thread ends at the end of Jesus life.** As he was hanging on the cross, he shouted, "It is finished." It's as if he was shouting, "I came as the sin sacrifice. The guilt and sin of the world has been transferred onto my shoulders. I am doing something for you. I am paying the debt. I am absorbing the punishment that is a result of your sinfulness. It is finished. I am the last sacrifice. It is done."

You see, you can never make yourself right with God, but Jesus can make you right with God because he paid the price in his own blood. And when you realize in your head and in your heart what Jesus did for you, everything changes. It's a powerful thing when you finally understand that he shed his blood, the innocent third party, taking on human form and experiencing life on this planet, exposing himself to all forms of ridicule, embarrassment, scorn, mockery and beating, and dying the death of a common criminal, because you matter to him. Because he'd rather absorb your punishment than see you experience it forever. Because he wants your life and mine to work. Jesus said, **"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"** (John 10:10, NIV) In other words, Jesus wants us to have lives that work—relationships that rock, families that flourish, careers that are meaningful. Next week we dive into the practical side of that and you won't want to miss it.

But I want to wrap up today by answering a question I get asked by people who are investigating Christianity. They ask, "OK Aaron, do you really believe it? Do you really buy it all? Is this stuff about Jesus really real?" So I want to end this Easter message by sharing with you why I am a Christian. Let me share just a few reasons. **"Why I'm a Christian** First, I'm a Christian because of the **"Eyewitness accounts."** eyewitness accounts of the people who knew Jesus. The New Testament was written either by people who spent time with Jesus and were direct eyewitnesses or those who had interviewed the eyewitnesses. When I read what they describe, and how they describe it, I find what they write believable, credible, and compelling.

And what they saw guided them in being so passionate about sharing their faith in Jesus that they were willing to risk it all, even face torture and death, because they saw with their own eyes.

I'm also a Christian because of "**The Christian life.**" that's offered. It is the most authentically human way to live. Following Christ motivates us to love our neighbors **and** our enemies. It challenges us to sacrifice something of our selves for other people—to be concerned about people that so many other people simply do not care about. It calls us to live a life of love.

Over the last 2,000 years of world history, almost all of the great social movements of compassion sprang from the followers of Jesus. The civil rights movement in the U.S., the end of apartheid in South Africa, movements to end slavery around the world—all these sprang from the teachings of Jesus. Over the centuries Christians have started thousands and thousands of the schools and hospitals around the world and in the U.S., as well as missions and social service agencies in our cities and communities. Good works like these have been done by Christians because of the impact Jesus made in their lives. Jesus said, "**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**" (John 13:34-35, NIV).

I am Christian also because the picture of God that Jesus portrayed is the most "**compelling picture of God.**" When Jesus looked at the multitudes of people and saw them as sheep without a shepherd and had compassion on them, I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus chastised the religious hypocrites but forgave a woman caught in adultery, I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus spent most his time with sinners who didn't even know that they were lost, I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus opened the eyes of blind Bartimaeus, who cried out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me" (Mark 10:47), I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus healed a man who wandered among the tombs, filled with demons, completely uncontrollable, I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus met a woman at a well who had been divorced 5 times, and he offered her living water so that she would never be thirsty again, and then he made her an evangelist to the people in her village, I see a compelling picture of God.

On the last night of his life, when Jesus washed his disciples' feet the way a slave would have, I see a compelling picture of God. When Jesus hung suffering on the cross, laying down his life for others, I see a compelling picture of God. And when Jesus rose from the grave, triumphing over evil and sin and death, I see a compelling picture of God.

I'm a Christian because of "**God's forgiveness and grace.**" and because when people receive that grace, they're changed and new life begins. I experienced that for myself growing up. I've known what it's like to be lost and then found. I was destructive to myself and others. I didn't care who I hurt, and I hurt a lot of people. I crushed other people's spirits, I vandalized property, I was angry, I was even suicidal. Until I had an unexpected experience of God that changed me. I realized that he loved me, and had a plan for my life, and I invited him in and he started to change me from the inside out. The way I looked at the world started to change, so did the way I looked at myself and the shame I carried around for so long. That's my story, it's like the story of so many other people who've received that same grace and forgiveness.

I'm a Christian because of the life God offers after death. "**Eternal life.**" When I look at the resurrection of Christ I have hope and I am grateful that I'm a follower of his. As a pastor I've done over 100 funerals. When I minister to people at times of death, when I face the loss of people that I love, when I think about my own mortality, my faith gives me peace, and hope, and allows me to live with joy. Jesus' resurrection means that death is not the final word. Jesus' resurrection was God's way of saying, "I know you're afraid of death because it seems so final, but don't be afraid, death is not an end, it is a new beginning."

And I'm a Christian because I've felt Christ's presence in my life "**Experiences of God's presence.**" The most profound experiences of my life have all related to my faith—the times when I've had the greatest contentment, love, hope, joy. I've experienced things in worship that I can't experience any other way—a peace and joy you can't get through a pill, or a bottle, or through buying a new gadget.

Everything in my life is richer because of my experience of Christ. I'm a better husband because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. I'm a better father because I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. I'm a better person. The richest parts of my life come from my relationship with God. And that's why I want other people to know the Jesus I know. Listen, my motive for sharing Jesus with others isn't based on instilling the fear of hell in people. My motive is wanting people to experience what I've experienced! I'm motivated thinking about the life that others might be missing out on. Jesus Christ is the life and if you don't know Jesus you're missing out on the best part of life—the joy and peace that you simply can't find anywhere else. God loves you and me so much, he wants to help us have lives that really work.

So if you're here today and you're not a Christian, you're missing out on the best parts of life. Your marriage is missing out on something, your family is missing out on something, your career, your life is missing something that it takes to be authentically human. You're missing out on the best part of being human without Jesus Christ in your life. And you can do something about that. Jesus talked about heaven like it was a party, a gigantic wedding banquet, that God invites everyone to. Some reject the invitations. Some just aren't interested in going to the party. Some say they're too busy to respond. We can accept his invitation, or reject it. If we reject it, we miss out on the life that really is life. God won't ever force you to come, but you've been invited. You can make excuses, you can reject the invitation, the choice is yours. But as your pastor I would say, "Please say yes. Please take hold of this life that is really life, this joy that nothing can defeat, this hope that nothing can overwhelm, the eternal life that no one can take from you. Please say yes."

If you've been riding that fence for a long, long time isn't it time, that you set it all aside and said yes? Especially on an awesome day like today. Easter Sunday 2007. The day we remember God's big event. Jesus coming back from death after making the ultimate sacrifice for you and me. Coming back from death to say, "you are forgiven, free and do not need to be afraid. Come follow me."

Make that decision, then find your way into a church, this one or any other church, I don't care. But find a place where you can flesh out your decision to follow with good teaching, ways to connect with other people, ways to serve, ways to discover your purpose.

Jesus was crucified, dead and buried and on the third day, Easter, he came back from the dead and brought life, and hope, and forgiveness, and power with him. He wants life to work. And it's all there for you. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank pastors Bill Hybels and Adam Hamilton for their resources for this message.*