

# Heaven on Earth

“Jesus defines you.”

John 6:32-35

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February 7, 2010

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## Is That All There Is?

A friend of mine wasn't much over 30 – barely beyond grad school with all the education it took to get to become a pastor. He was a serious scholar, certain about what he believed why he believed it; and he was no idler. He had been appointed to a lively church with people who loved him and considered him an up-and-coming preacher, destined to be a standout among his peers.

One day he said, “John, I can hardly wait until retirement. What do you think you're going to do when you retire?”

“Retire!” I said. “Are you serious? We're just getting started!”

He looked at me with a dead-serious face and said, “I'm not kidding. I'm counting the years until I can retire and I'm so looking forward to it.” I was baffled. He sounded like a guy who had done all that there was to do and was already bored.

Retirement is a good thing – in its time. In retirement there are all kinds of things that can be done. I've sometimes imagined it: how I could live just about anywhere I want and concentrate on some mission or ministry about which I have the most passion.

Or I could open up my own coffee shop: serve the highest quality coffee, brewed to just the right strength; serve gourmet sandwiches; and fill my store with carvings and books of faith and theology available for sale. The seating could be arranged so people could talk; and that would be encouraged. It could be a place where people exchange their ideas about faith; and it would be non-sectarian. No one would be allowed to show disrespect because of beliefs. It could be a place where the exchange of ideas and beliefs would be a blessing. So would the coffee. I could call it *Holy Grounds*.

Retirement can be good. It can be a meaningful time of life filled with projects and time to concentrate on relationships and significant accomplishments. But I don't think that was what my friend was thinking. It was more like he just wanted to be through

with the responsibility and routine of the profession he had worked so hard to enter. Already, he was bored.

The ancient Church named a number of sins that were called *deadly* because they had the capacity of sucking life and love out of a person's heart and imperil their soul. One of those deadly sins was called *acedia*, which is a spiritual boredom, sometimes also known as sloth. It's not just laziness. It's apathy – not caring – and it can drain the life right out of you.

I don't know if my friend was struggling with *acedia*, but there was something that had taken away his excitement for ministry. And I worried with good reason about his disappointment. He was victim to a lack of interest.

Have you noticed it: there are some people who seem to stay interested no matter what is going on, even when it seems like the cards are all stacked against them; then there are others who seem like they're just biding their time?

Maybe the difference between them has more to do with something going on inside them than what is happening from the outside.

### **The Resurrection and the Life**

The way the writer of the Gospel tells it, Jesus was nearing the end of his ministry. It wasn't that there was little left to do or that he was getting tired of it. He'd filled the three or four years of his public life with a lifetime of energy. Some of the people he saw had been crushed by circumstances they had no hope at all. They were sick and poor and broken and were branded *sinner*s because of it. Some had made terrible decisions, dug such deep holes for themselves they thought they could never climb out. Still others looked at the world around them and thought the oppression and injustice they saw would go on and on and never stop.

Most of them let these things define them. They were beaten.

This is who Jesus is: Jesus told them things about God they never heard before. He healed them and fed them and most of all loved them. He convinced them that beyond their wildest expectations, God was with them. And this gave them hope. You might say it even lifted them out of a living death, maybe even lifted them from a living hell, and brought them heaven on earth. Life.

And by every indication Jesus got a big kick out of it all. He wasn't near the end of his ministry because he was tired of it. He just knew that the confrontation was near. Those who found benefit in keeping things at a status quo were at a point of intolerance. They wanted an end to Jesus and what he was about.

So Jesus was in hiding until the right time, when he'd meet the opposition head-on. That's when messengers from his close friends near Jerusalem found him, bringing the troubling word that Lazarus was very ill. But Jesus waited; perhaps because he decided to make his moves on the basis of God's direction rather than reacting to the latest crisis like lots of us are apt to do.<sup>1</sup>

You might say that Jesus would only be defined by God.

In fact it wasn't until he knew that Lazarus had died when he went down, close to Jerusalem, where everyone knew it would be so dangerous to be.

They were going to Jerusalem. And Jesus said that Lazarus' illness would not be for his death; but they all knew that this could well mean it was going to be for *Jesus' death*.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was willing to go: for the sake of Lazarus, and for the sake of serving God no matter what. So they went to Bethany near Jerusalem, where a lot of people from the big city had come, sharing the rituals of mourning with the bereaved family – an extended luncheon held after a funeral that was over and done. Someone told Martha that Jesus was coming so she met him with a complaint that was as much a confession of faith as it was an accusation: “Lord, if you'd only been here, my brother would not have died. Yet, even now I know that whatever you ask, God will grant.”

When Jesus said, “Your brother will rise,” Martha rehearsed what most people of her day believed – there would be a resurrection of all the dead sometime far off in the future and God's kingdom would finally come. The living hell they were living would finally be over, and everything would then be heaven.

But Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

I preached my first full-length sermon on this passage because it grabbed me so hard. This is the very substance of who Jesus is. It's the very basis for our faith. Either buy into this and belong to Jesus or don't and go on without a clue of what you might be missing.

It's all about what defines you. *I am the resurrection and the life.* You're either going to be defined by whatever circumstances you're facing and wind up conditioned by death; because that's the circumstance that finally catches up to everyone.

Or be defined by Jesus who unleashes resurrection in you right now.

Death has no hold. It does not have to give you meaning. Jesus does: and no matter what else is going on, it can be heaven on earth.

Eternal life: right now.

### **What Defines You?**

It's possible to be a minister of the Gospel and still not get it. Whatever is going on – or not going on – can get you down. And you think, "Is that all there is? 'Might as well retire.'"

Or you can fill your life with Jesus and get a kick out of serving him in all things.

Paul, the early Christian leader, said "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."<sup>3</sup> Jesus defined his life.

I have an older friend who's been in and out of the hospital for a long time with a chronic condition. In fact, it's probably life-threatening. Yet when I talk to her I usually don't see someone who is discouraged. I see someone who lives through both the hard times and the reprieves by faith. She usually wears a smile. And she tells me that when she's in the hospital, if she can, she takes a walk down the hall and strikes up conversations with others. She tries to cheer them up a bit. She tells them about Jesus and what he means to her. And usually the word she brings gives a ray of hope and a reminder of God's love.

And that's her definition.

The resurrection and the life.

So, let me work. I'm having a blast. Then someday let me at my pension and own a coffee shop – or not.

For you and for me it will be heaven on earth as long as Jesus fills our life.

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<sup>1</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary vol IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1995. p 686.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1:21.