April 19/20, 2014

New Creation

Easter

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several years ago, Patti and I had the opportunity to spend about a week in Switzerland. The place where we were staying was about halfway up on a mountain, and you could look down over Lake Interlaken, and then the city of Interlaken, and the whole place was surrounded by these absolutely majestic mountain ranges. The place we were staying had a little patio that you could go out on and eat your meals. I remember the very first morning, we got our breakfast, we went out on this patio, and the environment, the view, was just absolutely breathtaking. And we both talked about how wonderful it was going to be to spend a week there. But then the strangest thing happened. Through the course of the day, clouds and fog rolled in, so thick that you could not see the lake, you could not see the town, you could not see a single mountain, you could barely see anything in front of you. And I remember saying to Patti, "It's not a big deal. We are here for a week." But the next day, it was still like that, and then the next day, and then there's a sense of urgency, we only have three more days, two more days, one more day. Wouldn't you know it that first morning glimpse was the only glimpse we got the entire week. All week we knew the beauty of the lake and the mountains, we knew it was there, we just couldn't seem to get the clouds to dissipate and take in the view.

You know, over the years, I've talked to a lot of people, and if I think about those conversations, a lot of them sound just like that. There's people that would say deep within them, there is this longing, this longing for something more, this longing for something meaningful, this longing for beauty and for pleasure and for purpose and meaning, and there's this sense in which I know it's out there, but I just can't seem to find it. But I have to believe there's something more than just merely surviving. Isn't it possible that that is actually your soul longing for the place that you are created for? Wouldn't it be true that every innate desire that you have has a corresponding reality? It's the only way to explain why that desire is there. So for example, you get hungry because such a thing as food exists. You get thirsty because such a thing as water exists. You get tired because such a thing as rest exists. If that's true, then wouldn't it equally be true that if I long for love, if I long for meaning, if I long for purpose, if I long for beauty, if I long for relationship with God, wouldn't that be evidence that there is a corresponding reality that those things do exist out there somewhere?

All you have to do is open your Bible to the first page and you realize that is exactly what the Bible teaches, that you were made in the image of God for a place God called paradise. A place that was filled with meaning, it was filled with purpose, it was filled with relationship, a place of unimaginable pleasure and beauty, a place that we were made for, that we would experience paradise in this beautiful relationship with God as our Creator. But if you keep flipping the pages, you get to Chapter 3 and the clouds and the fog began to settle in. Adam and Eve decide that life would be better with them in charge. It would be better if we created our own paradise. So they rebelled against God, they sinned against God. And at the end of Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve were ushered out of paradise to a world very different from the world they were created for. We feel that deeply. Thousands of years later, we still feel this longing within us that it seems like I was made for something more: Please tell me this isn't all there is.

This argument from our innate desires that there is a longing for something more, a longing for someone outside of myself, a longing for God is so powerful that the atheist, the naturalist feel

compelled to explain some way to explain this away. Basically, the argument goes like this: Actually there's no way to know what's real. There is no way to know what's true. Just because people throughout all time in every culture have had a deep longing for a relationship with a God doesn't mean God's real. It's just merely hardwired; it's genetic coding, in order to help us survive. As a matter of fact, they go so far as to say it's really irrelevant if it's true or not true. The only thing that matters is if it helps you to survive. So even though there's no God, we have this longing because somehow that longing helps us to survive better. So the idea would be something like this: at one time, there was food to survive in the West where the sun sets, and so I have a genetic coding to admire the sunset because it draws me to the West and that's where the food is, and that will cause me to survive. So at the end of the day, that's why we have these longings and desires.

Now that theory is filled with flaws, probably the most obvious flaw is if it's true there is no such thing as truth and reason and persuasion, and the truth is actually irrelevant, all that matters is what we need to survive, then it will be right to say there is no reason to believe what the atheist says. In other words, their own argument defeats themselves because there would be no basis to believe a single word they say. But I would suggest to you that even the atheist themselves don't believe their own argument. Over the last twenty years, we've seen a resurgence of what they call the New Atheist, and they have made millions and millions and millions of dollars on books seeking to persuade people, to reason with people that atheism is true. If there's no such thing as truth, if people are genetically coded, if it's just hardwired and you can't change that, why argue? Why have a debate? Why write a book? My suggestion would be because deep in their hearts, they know that there's something more, that there is such a thing as truth, there is such a thing as meaning and purpose, there is such a thing as reason and persuasion, and their behavior gives them away.

But it isn't just them, it's us. Wouldn't it be true that there's something deep inside of us that says there's got to be more to this than just hardwiring, than just genetic coding, that's necessary for survival. When I listen to a beautiful piece of music, when I stand before a breathtaking piece of art, when I admire the majesty of a mountain or watch the sunset, or when I hold my child in my arms and there is an unimaginable connection of love, isn't there something deep within me that says this is real, this is real, this isn't just genetic coding? This is real. And I feel it deeply.

All this reminds me one of my favorite books that I've read in the last couple of years. It's a book called *Not God's Type*, written by a woman by the name Holly Ordway. It's basically an autobiography of her journey from atheism to a deeply meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. She describes herself as an atheist professor. She had a PhD in literature, and she said she actually took great pride in her title atheist professor, she took great delight in laughing at and making fun of Christians being so simple-minded and naïve, and full of wishful thinking. But there was a growing problem, she said, that her passion was literature and specifically, poetry, and poetry is filled with beauty, it's filled with art, it's filled with despair and meaning and hope and joy and struggles, yet she was aware that in her atheistic worldview, those things are not supposed to be real, and yet, for her, they were deeply real, and they were deeply meaningful, and she didn't know what to do with that, so she said for years, she just sought to pretend this tension didn't exist. In her words, she just locked herself in her atheistic fortress. She was able to do that for several years after she finished her PhD, she said she burned out on literature, left it alone for several years, but then was hired on to be a professor of literature in college. And her specialty was poetry. Now again in order to teach this poetry, she had to go back into it, and take it apart, understand it and live with it. She said one of the things that troubled her is the most meaningful of the poetry that she studied came from a Christian worldview, and when she read about despair and struggle and loneliness and emptiness, she said there was something deep within her that resonated with this. But then those poems were

also filled with hope and joy and happiness and in a sense a way back out. And she recognized their worldview was completely inadequate to explain what was happening deep within her. In her words, it began a change deep within her to consider the fact that maybe she didn't have it right. Her journey ended finally entering into a deep, meaningful relationship with Jesus.

One of the lines that she used in the book that I thought was striking was she described herself by saying, for years she had feasted on despair, and now she was starving to death. Reminds me a lot of a poem that was written by Franz Kafka, a parable really, about a hundred years ago. It's called *The Hunger Artist.* Kafka as an atheist was writing this story about the hunger artist, who basically fasted for a living. He would sit in the city square, he would fast for long periods of time, people would put money in his basket, and that's how he lived. But overtime, people grew weary of the hunger artist, they were no longer interested, they no longer gave money, and he ended up joining the circus. He was in the cage alongside other animals and people would come to see the animals and they would glance in to see the hunger artist. He wasn't really one of the main attractions but it's still a way to survive. Because he received such little attention, the caretakers lost track of how many days he had fasted and he went far over his limit. When they found him, he was lying on a bed of straw, dying. In his final breaths, he said to the caretakers, "I never determined to be a hunger artist on purpose. If I could have ever found food that satisfies, I would have gladly eaten." In that story, Kafka was telling his own story as an atheist. There was something deep inside of him that long for something more, that long for something deep and meaningful, he had a sense within him that I was made for something more than this. But he feared that he would die without ever finding what that something is. We were made for something more, weren't we?

Video Testimony: *I was born July 10th, 1989, and all through my childhood, everything was fine. It was great, actually. I loved everything I did. I grew up normal, your average American kid. I love those years and thought I had everything. It wasn't until after high school that I started falling. My grades started to slip because I was skipping class and I started to spend more money on alcohol than I did on food or gas. But it's okay, it's just social, right? I don't have anything to hide. That isn't until social turn to lonely and that something I didn't need to hide became a gateway to thoughts of suicide. I had never had thoughts like that before. I was happy, content, until I was lying on the floor, room spinning with one hand holding onto reality while the other clutched to a happiness that was slowly thinning. All until one night, I was caught, cuffed in the back of a car with nothing left but my own thoughts. Then the officer gave me a choice, it was either detox, or the hospital. Well, I didn't want to deal with the consequences, so it was off to the hospital with me. Seven days in a place trying to convince people that you are not crazy is bound to put anyone on their knees. But before I knew it, it was all over, I was back out on my own with a new beginning and a broken heart. But I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to search and I didn't know where to start…*

If you open up the Bible just to read it cover to cover, the first thing that you experience is the beauty of a garden, paradise. It's a place filled with meaning and purpose, a place filled with pleasure, a place filled with justice and truth and morality, a place that seems to have everything that my soul longs for, in a beautiful, meaningful relationship with my Creator. But as you keep reading through the Bible, paradise is left behind and the world more and more looks like the world we are more familiar with, a world filled with despair and hate and hurt and pain and struggle until the story moves to that horrifying moment when we find our Creator who had become flesh nailed to a bloody cross by those whom He had created.

What happened to the story? What happened to the story? It was paradise. So beautiful. What happens that we as creation, when our Creator entered this world, chose to execute Him on a cross? We could say that that day was the worst day in all of human history. On that day for three hours in the middle of the day, it became dark, as if all creation was mourning the horror of this moment. But it would be equally true to say that that moment was the greatest moment in human history. For it was the moment when God fulfilled a promise that He had made thousands of years before. Literally before you can turn in the page in Genesis 3, discussing Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, God makes a promise, and God's promise is that somehow, some way, He will make a way back to paradise because that's what you are created for. There seems to be the hint in Genesis 3 that it would include the shedding of blood. Before you actually get out of the Book of Genesis, it becomes clear that somehow, some way, the Creator God of Genesis 1 would actually take on human flesh and it would be His blood that would be shed, to pay the debt of your sin and mine.

One of the questions that people often ask is why did anybody have to pay for the debt? Why couldn't God just forgive? The answer would be because the concept of "just forgive" doesn't exist in reality. Those are just words. What you are asking is why couldn't God just pretend it didn't happen. Think of it this way, if after the service today, I back my vehicle into your vehicle and I make a huge dent in it. There're a couple of options here. One is you could ask me to pay for that. And that would be justice. I did it, I should pay for it. That would be right. Or you could say, "You know, I'm deciding to just forgive you." That means that you have to absorb the debt yourself. Your car is now devalued, somebody has to pay for that, so you've agreed to absorb the debt onto yourself. The one option that's not on the table is we can't pretend it didn't happen. It did happen. And somebody has to pay. If someone you dearly love was murdered, the one option that would not be on the table is to pretend like it didn't happen. Somebody has to absorb that pain and that debt.

At the end of the day, there're two options: Either you trust God to pay the debt of your sin, or you pay your own debt. The one option that's not on the table is we can't pretend it didn't happen. So the question might be, "Okay, if God paid for my debt, why would He do that? And the answer is because He loves you. And He made you for something more. It's interesting when people talk in our culture, they want to deny that God is a God of judgment, but they want to believe that God is a God of love, and I often ask this question: What makes you believe that God is a God of love? Are you going to take me that you look around the world such as it is today with all the pain, with all the struggle, with all the suffering, with all the heartache, and your conclusion is God is a God of love. That makes absolutely no sense. The reason I believe God is a God of love is because He tells me so in His book. But the same book that says God is a God of love says God is a God of judgment and somebody must pay the debt of sin. I also believe that God is a God of love because in a moment in time, God demonstrated His love. The discussion about the love of God is not religious theory. It's rooted in historical fact. There was a moment in time where God actually became flesh, became a man, lived a perfect life, so He can go to the cross because He had no sin, He had no debt of His own to pay so He could take on the debt of our sin upon Himself and to pay that price. The Scripture say that **God demonstrated His love towards us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us**. John 3:16 says, **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**. That is the language that says God has made it possible on the basis of His love to make a way back to the world you are created for. God is so passionate about His mission to get you back to the world that your soul longs for that He was willing to die Himself to make it possible.

Jesus Himself said that was the mission. Jesus on the cross was not a mission that has gone badly. It was the mission. He said Himself that He would be crucified by the Romans. But in that same discussion, He said, I will also rise again on the third day and I will conquer sin and death once and for all. Not a spiritual, abstract kind of resurrection. A literal, physical, bodily resurrection. A resurrection that is rooted in historical fact. The resurrected Jesus would appear to hundreds of people. His resurrection was so believable, so compelling that over 10,000 people in Jerusalem alone would believe in the resurrected Christ in the weeks immediately following. Matthew 28 gives us the historical record of the resurrection of the Jesus, let me just read it to you:

> **Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."**
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> **And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.** (*NASB, Matthew 28:1-9)

You might say the story begins with creation in a garden. But on that resurrection morning, a new story began in a new garden, a garden that housed an empty tomb. This was the beginning of new creation. This was the beginning of a new story. This was the beginning of our promise, that God had made a way back to the world that my soul longs for, a world of beauty, a world of significance and purpose and meaning, a world of love and relationships, a world of justice and goodness and morality. The world that my soul longs for has now been made possible through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The story really culminates in Revelation 21. It is the story of the New Heaven and the New Earth, the place that our souls long for. One of the unique things about the Bible is the Bible is not a very descriptive book. It does not give a lot of details about anything. So it's quite unusual when you get to Revelation 21 and we see so much detail about the New Heaven and the New Earth, about the building materials, about the gold, and the gems and the jewels and the precious stones and how the New Jerusalem, the New Heaven and Earth is put together. And you have this spectacular, artsy, beautiful picture, and then you imagine the very glory of Jesus shining through these precious stones and the absolute breathtaking description of what that would be like.

I can assure you that in that moment when God ushers in the New Heaven and the New Earth and we experience a beauty that we have longed for, but never known, there will be a sense deep within us that says this is the world that my soul has longed for, I knew through the clouds and the fog, I knew it was there. And this is what I've always wanted. And for the first time in your life in that moment, you will know I am finally home.

So here's the question. If you were made for paradise, if you were made for something more and your soul reflects that, it longs for that, if you were to be honest you would say something deep

inside of me does long for something more, there's something that says please tell me this isn't all there is. If you were made for something more, if your soul longs for that, if Jesus on the basis of His death, burial and resurrection has made a way back and He offers it freely as a gift, why would you not receive it? Why would you not receive it? It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what you've done, it doesn't matter what's been done to you, it doesn't matter what your story is. Jesus paid the debt and He offers the way back freely as a gift. Why would you not receive that?

This morning, we celebrated an empty tomb that Jesus has made a way back on the basis of His death, burial and resurrection. He is not dead. He is very risen.

> *Our Father, we celebrate this morning a risen Savior. God, I can safely say every person in this room if he or she was to be honest would say there's something very deep within us that longs for something more, that longs to thrive, that longs to know a reality beyond just merely surviving. Lord, help us to understand that we were made for such a place. And on the basis of what Jesus has done for us, that place is freely offered as a gift. Lord, give us the courage, give us the faith, give us the minds and the heart to believe that we would one day be together in a place that finally feels like home. In Jesus's Name. Amen.*

Testimony continues: *Starts at the beginning, but when does that end? You can't choose to have an end if you don't choose to begin. And there's this sin that just keeps sinning from what we chose in the beginning but what we choose to do now is live in loss or proclaim the winnings that He has regretlessly given to us day after day. And it's not about what we can say or do, but only what He did that made the way. And this way, this way is the only path, it's the only road to everlasting life and even better, everlasting love that's buried deeper than all the strife. It shines brighter in the darkness. And it sinks deeper than the sin. Because of this love, death no longer wins. I hate to give it away early but I can't bear to hold it in, for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son and He was the only One whose work on a cross could not be undone. We've all heard His Name, whether you know Him or not. And if you do, you know His love and it can't be forgotten. And He goes by many names: Christ, Lord, Logos, the Word made flesh, the One who came to save us, to save us from our sin because we couldn't resist the temptation without hesitation, we stepped in and trap close shut, separation from Him. But when God created man, He already knew the whole story. He had written the book and knew His main character was worthy of all glory. And from the beginning, it's been said that the Christ would come in the flesh, He come to die on a cross, to get us out of this mess. And yet we can't bear to give up this sin that controls our hearts. But what He did clears our name, disease erased from the chart. We have freedom. We are free now. And He has made us His wife. He's invited us into this relationship of love, everlasting love, everlasting life.*

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