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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The World Without Him

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ APRIL 15, 2018

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### **An Inner Enemy**

In the critical moment of the film, our hero is at the brink of despair. This is actually the plot twist in many of our favorite movies and shows: the hero has a time of crisis when they are up against it. The Indians are attacking the wagon train; James Bond (or Spiderman or Wonder Woman) is in a seemingly hopeless spot; Indiana Jones is captured by the Nazis; Luke Skywalker is in the clutches of Darth Vader. The forces of darkness are closing in. But this particular hero is facing an inner enemy. It feels to him as if his personal world is collapsing, crashing in. He feels worthless, an utter failure. What is there to live for? Should he just end it all? Would the world be better if he were dead?

We know this feeling. Discouragement can cloud our perspective. When we're sick or in pain, facing a serious disease; when we've lost someone we've depended upon; when our family life is filled with conflict; when we lose a job or suffer a business bankruptcy; when we make a terrible mistake that leads to a personal failure; when we experience emotional depression or are physically exhausted ... in times like these, our view of the world becomes distorted and warped. Joy and encouragement, hope and fulfillment can all disappear, like the sun obscured by storm clouds, as our personal world gets very dark.

But then God sends a messenger to pierce through those dark clouds of gloom and hopelessness. The divine message helps us see things in a different way. And this is exactly what happens to our hero, George Bailey ("It's a Wonderful Life," 1946). In desperate circum-

stances, convinced everything would be better if he'd never been born, he is allowed to see how life for his family, friends and community could have been very different—and **not** for the better—in a world without him.

### **The Speculation of Alternative History**

It has become an intriguing exercise, not only for film makers and novelists, but also for serious historians and cultural commentators. It's called "Alternative History." Some have written about what the world would be like if the South had won the Civil War and we had become two nations, divided at the Mason-Dixon Line. Some have written about what the world today would be like if the Nazi conquest of Europe had lasted and Britain had fallen, or if the Soviet Union had defeated the West in a global conflict. Dark "post-apocalyptic" films like "Blade Runner" and "Mad Max" envision an earth after a nuclear holocaust. Alternative history: it's thoughtful and it's speculative—and it leads us to see things in a very different way, as it did for George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life."

But alternative history is not new to the modern world. None other than the great Apostle Paul, one of the world's all-time geniuses, engaged in speculative "what if ..." imaginings in our scripture text for today. Just two weeks ago we celebrated Easter, looking back to that dramatic turning-point on which the entire Christian church is built: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **But what if that didn't happen?** Let's read Paul's alternative history.

**A**nd if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. <sup>15</sup>And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. <sup>16</sup>And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. <sup>18</sup>In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! <sup>19</sup>And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.

<sup>20</sup>But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

<sup>21</sup>So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. <sup>22</sup>Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.

1 Corinthians 15:14-22 (NLT)

### Considering the “What Ifs”

What would this world be like if the body of Jesus of Nazareth had rotted in a grave and His entire message had died with Him? What if there had been no Christian faith? That is the intriguing topic of this year’s Summer Reading Challenge book, “Unimaginable: What Our World Would Be Like Without Christianity,” by young American philosopher Jeremiah Johnston. He takes us through a wide-sweeping arc of history and society, and then zeroes in on the personal level: What would your life and mine be like if Christ was still dead and His teachings abandoned?

Here is the outline of Johnston’s analysis:

- What the world was like **before Christ** (and presumably, if He hadn’t come or had been snuffed out, the world would still be like)
- What the world was like, and would be like, when the Christian faith is willfully **abandoned** or **extinguished** (as we witnessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century under Hitler’s fascism and Stalin’s communism, two world-threatening ideologies that were atheistic and power-hungry)
- What the world is like when the Christian faith is **embraced** and **lived** faithfully and consistently (including the difference it makes in our personal life, our family life and our community life)

If perspective was restored to a man who had nearly lost his way in “It’s a Wonderful Life,” perhaps the insights of Jeremiah Johnston can help some people in the modern world who are on the brink of

losing their faith and their values. Perhaps their eyes can be opened by imagining what life would be like in an alternative history. Would your life and mine be better if Christianity were proven to be a lie and Jesus of Nazareth's bones were proven to have rotted in a grave? Would American society be better if, as some radicals and progressives seem to wish, all Christian faith were driven from our public and private lives? Would a universal atheism (such as Communism promotes) or a radical Islam (such as the jihadists promote) make the world a better, happier, more just and safe place? What would be lost if the Christian Savior didn't exist?

### **Competing World Views**

Every person and every culture has a "world view." The term might seem foreign to you, but its meaning is simple and basic. A world view is the set of assumptions and beliefs and operating convictions that lead us to do what we do. Nobody has no worldview; no one but people of extremely low intelligence can operate without forming some rules for organizing their experiences.

The Christian faith outlined in the Bible and taught by the Church for 2,000 years (though not always lived perfectly) is one world view. There are many competing ones. Some people, whether they have thought it through carefully or just adopted the "group think" of their peers, operate as if there is no God and no meaning beyond the material world. Some have a worldview of optimistic humanism, that mankind is evolving towards a higher plane of perfection. Some have an Eastern religion view of life that it is an endless cycle of death and reincarnation. Some believe that power or money or pleasure or the Self is all that matters.

### **Replacing the Christian World View**

America was founded by people who shared, nearly universally, a Christian and biblical world view. Not all were personally devoted followers of Christ, but they shared a set of assumptions based on the biblical understanding of human nature and right-and-wrong. It is the culture in which most of us were raised. We took its values

and principles for granted. And now those assumptions are under significant attack in the western world. Of course we all believe in freedom and respect and individual rights, and we all believe that slavery and mistreatment of women and abuse of power are wrong. But where did those ideas come from? Certainly not from the ancient world, from the Greek and Roman empires that preceded our western culture. And those ideas are not found in ancient China or India either.

If the foundation of a society is taken away, will that society be able to last? Imagine you're playing with a child, building a fort or castle of sticks or blocks. If the bottom layer were suddenly pulled out, would the rest of the structure still stand? Those who want to remove Christianity from society should heed the warning: "You might get what you want, but you might not want what you get." Even aggressive atheist writer Richard Dawkins, in a moment of candor in an interview with *The Times* of London a few years ago, admitted: "I have mixed feelings about the decline of Christianity, insofar as Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse." All we need do is to look at recent history (when Hitler and Stalin tried to eliminate the Church) to see that his fears are valid.

### **The Key Issue**

It is with great love and concern for our nation and western culture that we hold fast to the biblical world view—especially for the sake of our kids and grandkids and the generations that will follow them. A writer in the magazine *National Review* recently commented:

Many millions of American young people just seem lost. They're deeply suspicious of organized religion, yet they can't escape the nagging need for transcendence in their lives. They want purpose, but they don't know what purpose means apart from pursuing material things. They are keenly aware that mankind is fallen, and that while the post-Christian west has allegedly killed God, it can't seem to replace Him with anything better.

The institutional church (or “organized religion,” as the journalist calls it) is certainly flawed, and has a decidedly mixed record of some good and some bad. Those who are outside the church, or on the fringe of it, may point their fingers at Protestant and Catholic denominations, correctly condemning the sex sins and the inconsistencies and the political infighting of their clergy and leaders. The indictments are true. If you think there is sin and imperfection within the church, take it from one who has been an ordained minister and involved in denominational and inter-church politics for 39 years: you have no idea how much we have screwed up the pure and perfect teachings of the Bible by our sinfulness.

But focusing on the flaws of the church misses the fundamental issue completely. Jeremiah Johnston ends his book with these words:

We do not worship Christianity. We worship and follow Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes the difference. There is no perfect church, because the church is made up of imperfect people. But the Spirit of Jesus is at work every single day. Ask Jesus to enter your unimaginable circumstance. He will bring you forgiveness, hope, healing and transformation.

The great Russian author Leo Tolstoy once famously observed: “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This insight can apply to the impact of Jesus inside the life of those who have opened themselves to Him. He works in us a transformation that conforms us more and more to His own character. Growing Christians, in whom the Spirit of God is at work, do indeed become more and more like one another in how they think and feel.

This process of gradually changing and conforming is not due to peer pressure or “group think” from some external source. It comes from within. It is because of His new life inside us that we are able to turn from the chaotic impact of sin and temptation to willingly and joyfully choose to live as Jesus our Lord desires for us. ■

