

### **It's Counter-Intuitive**

Psalm 30  
I Corinthians 9:24-27

For almost 2000 years biblical scholars agreed that the ancient Jews drew a straight line between sin and illness. You sin, you get sick. You stay righteous, you stay healthy, we thought they thought. Then along came a formidable “school” of theologians, mostly Germans, who challenged not only this idea, but many others. Was Jesus *really* God? Do miracles actually occur, or do they so contradict the laws of nature as to make them impossible even for God? How did Mary really get pregnant? Did Jesus truly rise from the dead? The men (all of them in those days) posing include names both familiar and formidable in the theological world. They were trying to reformulate Christianity on a more “scientific” basis, on the sincere belief that they were helping by cutting away the frills and drilling down to the core of the faith.

In 2007 a well-funded effort started to try to “discover whether an historical Jesus existed.” It involved respected scholars from a variety of fields: historians, anthropologists, theologians, archaeologists and others—all of them published masters of their fields—joined. They called it the Jesus Project. Their work essentially revived the German School after about 150 years. Both groups took the same angle: we accept nothing about Jesus until it is proven by more than the rudimentary evidence of the Gospels. They both read ancient Roman historians, like Josephus. They both examined clerical records kept by the Roman Empire. They both examined

personal correspondence not only from the Apostle Paul, but from a number of other figures of the time, including the early “Church Fathers”, Bishops Ireneous and Origen and more. Both the German School and the Jesus Project did not publish final conclusions. But both made it clear they doubted a Jewish rabbi of the first century had appeared on earth as the son of God.

Why do we dwell on this doubt at such length? Because we live amidst many, many people who have the same attitude. Prove it they say. Jim Waltz, senior pastor of the Bonhomme Presbyterian Church in suburban St. Louis, MO., calls this approach “show me Christianity”. He goes on to note that while the “show me” approach is necessary when deciding on how to vote, or when engaged in a business negotiation, it turns faith on its head. As Christians, we need not swallow every story in the Bible, as it tells us a great fish swallowed the Prophet Jonah. Obviously, God does not intend for us to take some things in the Bible literally. Jonah and the fish make a good example. Or when Jesus told us to pluck our eyes out of their sockets when (not *if*) we look at others inappropriately. No, we must test not only our faith, but also how God wants us to read a specific passage. Does the Spirit that inspired each word of scripture mean for us to take each passage literally? In many cases, the answer is yes. Or does God want us to draw metaphorical message? Or a poetical one?

King David wrote Psalm 30. Without question he honestly believed he had caused a serious illness by his own sinful actions. He wrote the psalm to thank God for his healing. Verse 2: “O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed

me.” Certainly we engage in a number of behaviors that are the definite and direct causes of disease. Eating too much of the wrong kinds of foods, for example, or rooting for the wrong college basketball team. (And I literally mean this, as the stress cannot be good for our systems.) King David took this very seriously, as apparently he had been sick enough to cause fear that he was headed for Sheol at any moment.

Yet like many psalms, number thirty contains a “turn”, a change of direction. In this case the turn appears in verse four. “Sing praises to the Lord,” it admonishes us. And soon after we read, “for his anger is but for a moment; but his favor lasts a lifetime.” Later we read a first-person repetition of this thought: “You have turned my mourning into dancing. I cannot remain silent, I must sing of your praises again.” So while God can quite appropriately get angry with sinners who refuse to obey God’s law, when we turn to God in penitence, God chooses to heal, to inspire, to get us dancing. “But,” our skeptical neighbors questioning the miracles and resurrection will ask, “what about all those people stricken with affliction who do not get to go dancing again? What about those who die instead of rising from their sickbeds?” I consider these fair and vital questions. For two reasons. First, we must know the answers we trust if we are to continue walking in faith in Christ ourselves. Second, we must know how to answer them with humility and integrity if we are to assist our skeptical neighbors to come walk with us.

It is not that their salvation rests on our backs. It is, rather, that part of our calling as followers of Jesus is to first, walk our talk, and second, to bear witness to

others about our true experiences of the gracious power of God. This is exactly the Apostle Paul's topic when he writes about running the race to win. (To be clear the following story, while true, did not involve me personally.) A man had fallen into addiction to cocaine. After years of denial that he had a problem he spiraled farther out of control. He lost his wife and family and savings and their home. Finally he reported to his pastor that he felt he was at the gates of hell and he had brought it all down on himself. His sin had caused his sickness.

Still, the man resisted changing anything significant about his life and habits. The pastor enlisted an older man in their church, whom he knew to be a recovering alcoholic. The three had lunch. The older man's addiction was known only to a few. He was a high-functioning addict. The cocaine addict respected him greatly. The older man disclosed his dependency, and that he could stay sober—even after years—*only* by religiously observing two disciplines: attending twelve-step meetings and church. The younger man listened, and after a few more weeks of stubborn spiraling, began the process. Thirty-five years later, he still works on it. He got initial treatment, joined twelve-step groups, and resumed going to church, something he had stopped in shame after his divorce and loss of everything. His is not the story of a miraculous healing that instantly and completely changed his life around. He has fallen off the wagon repeatedly. He has even experimented with other addictive substances. He remains estranged from his wife and children. But he does make his weekly meeting and he does go to church. There can be little doubt he would no longer be alive without this change.

Now. How did that pastor know the older parishioner was an alcoholic? More importantly, how did that pastor know he could set up a situation where the other man would have to tell somebody else? He did because the man had told him to feel free to pick his spots, to be careful, but to know he wanted to “make his testimony”. He knew his life experience could make a decisive difference for others. This is what Paul refers to when he writes of “proclaiming to others” while continuing to practice self-discipline in order to receive the “imperishable” prize. In his case, it likely has nothing to do with addiction. He refers instead to living in such a way as to make himself eligible for eternal life in the presence of the risen Christ. The older alcoholic understood that perfectly well; he had an impact on my life as well, as the national director of a Christian organization on which I served on its board for years. In his spiritual maturity he had come not only to understand, but to advocate for this combination of self-discipline and testimony to others. He had learned something he wanted everybody to know. Discipline plus testimony equals “winning”. It means both changing destructive patterns and running toward the goal of God.

Paul had learned this formula as well. It defined his entire ministry. He worked himself to the bone physically and spiritually in order to offer a saving relationship with Christ to all. Mind you, in his zeal he actually writes something with which I disagree. “Winners” in footraces often do not cross the finish line first. Anyone who has ever attended a cross-country footrace knows this. Most of the spectators crowd the finish line at the right moment to urge on the front-runners. They scream and clap for their favorites by name. Then something interesting happens. Most of the onlookers

wander back up the course and begin to encourage all the trailing runners coming in to finish. An American high school cross-country race covers 5 kilometers, or 3.1 miles. Even in that relatively short distance a considerable gap can develop between the first and the last finishers. The spectators cheer for them all. And typically, the second-loudest support (after that for the leaders) goes to the very last runners to cross the finish line.

I think we all understand something important: what matters is to cross the line at all. To keep running until you get home. Spiritually, this means urging one another to keep going, to run the race across the finish line, to observe those disciplines which empower us to make it all the way to God. Or perhaps, counter-intuitively, to quit doing the things that block God from making it all the way to us. I speak not of sinning. I am a sinner, as I well know. But I also know the scriptures teach that we do not have to finish first. We just have to keep running. This can mean doing the hard, hard work of quitting a destructive habit. It can mean finding the energy to push on, through prayer, through recovery groups, through just plain coming to church.

Keep running. Accept the support of the rest of us, who also must muster what it takes to keep running. It may seem that we must satisfy God with good behavior. That matters, but what really matters is trusting in the process. "Winning" means finishing. Keep going until you have.