

CHRIST'S ULTIMATE IDENTIFICATION

by David L. Hatton
(an Easter sermon, preached March 27, 2005)

Scripture Text: John 20:1-18

This passage of Scripture is a familiar one, but I don't think it has ever been accurately portrayed until recently. Some of you have seen and probably all of you have heard about the movie *The Passion*. In that movie, Mel Gibson decided to show the truth: Jesus left the tomb naked. In His incarnation, Jesus made an entire from-the-cradle-to-the-grave identification with humanity, just the way Job described it (Job 1:21a), "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." This is exactly what I've seen as an RN. Babies are born naked, and we send the dead, young and old, naked to the morgue, usually wrapped in a sheet or body bag. Death is the great equalizer. It strips all of us completely bare of everything, no exceptions!

I believe there's a special message for us in the way Christ came out of the tomb with nothing on. Death strips us naked, but only to prepare us for resurrection glory. You might be thinking, "But David, how do you know that you and Mel Gibson are right?" Well, *The Passion* movie is not what convinced me. It only supports what I've learned in a 5-month long biblical and psychological study. You see, I've had a 25-year-old, unresolved issue related to my hospital work. Although I've always been taught, and have myself always taught, that nudity was obscene, I found that seeing nakedness routinely as a nurse taught just the opposite. What my research did was not only to validate my nursing experience, but to open my eyes in a new way to this and many other Bible passages.

A Healthier View of "Normal Nudity" in Bible Times

I have discovered that there was a healthier view of normal nudity in the ancient culture of Bible times. Now what I mean by "normal nudity" is nakedness that is considered routine or common, as opposed to coercive nakedness or nudity for lustful purposes.

For instance, when God decided He wanted a visible sign to identify His covenant people, what was it? Yes, circumcision: cutting off the foreskin from the male genitals. Is that a visible sign? Not in our culture! But in ancient times, latrines were outside in one location and used by both sexes. In cities influenced by Rome all around the Mediterranean, there were huge public bath houses. These Roman baths, and the toilet facilities in them, were co-ed. These public baths were universally popular and the common people as well as the rich attended them together. These places made male Jewish genitals visible to all. We read in Acts 16:3 that "Paul wanted to take him (Timothy) along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area." Nudity was socially visible at the public baths or at the common latrines, and even at the public gymnasiums associated with the baths. The term "gymnasium" comes from the Greek word for "naked" because athletes, both male and female used to do their exercises in the nude!

In Bible times, people bathed outdoors. It wasn't just the poor either. Pharaoh's daughter herself did so, as we see in Exodus 2:5. When Bathsheba was bathing outside on her roof it was a common and acceptable practice of normal nudity, and God condemned, not her nakedness, but King David's lustful and adulterous behavior with her. People went to the rivers and streams to bathe, and this was a common practice until indoor plumbing brought the streams into the house.

In Bible times, people were baptized with their clothes entirely removed. The *mikveh* baptism, a strict Jewish ritual washing that required a completely nude immersion, was used by John the Baptist and continued to be used by the early church for 400 years. Can you imagine the scene in

Acts 2:41 when 3000 people were won to Christ on the day of Pentecost. Those 3000 new converts were all baptized publicly in the nude.

In Bible times, people often did their outside work without clothing. In those days clothing was extremely expensive. Most people owned only a single garment. If someone was working to pay off a debt, they gave their garment as a surety, but God said in Exodus 22:26-27, "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in?" And when Jesus was prophesying about the "end times" in Mat 24:17-18, he said, "Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak." Why take off your clothes to do manual labor? Because of sweat and dirt. Washing out clothes would wear them out fast. And people couldn't afford that. But it cost nothing to wash off your sweat and dirt down at the stream.

In Bible times slaves were purchased from the market place nude, and often had to work that way. Jesus exemplified a slave's work at the Last Supper. In John 13:4-5 (NASB) it says that [He] "rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded." The towel was tied around him to keep it off the floor and to dry with, not for the sake of modesty. The disciples had probably already seen and been with Jesus naked when they bathed at the river.

David danced before God naked except for a small vest. Saul, Isaiah, and Micah all prophesied naked publicly. Peter went fishing in the nude. But why didn't I learn all this in Bible College? Dr. James McKeever, in *It's In the Bible*, has an answer:

"There's a tribe, which lives on the island of West Kalimantan (formerly Dutch Borneo), who go nude because of the extreme heat. They go to church this way, and there are actually pictures of them taking communion (the Lord's Supper) with the entire church nude.

"To most Christians in America a nude communion scene would seem terrible. However, to Christians in other parts of the world, it would seem very normal and natural. It is a very difficult task to sort out in our minds what has come from our culture, our environment and our upbringing, and what is truly part of God's character. The thing that we need to be very careful of is not to create God in our own cultural image. We need to guard against attributing characteristics to Him based on the taboos of our society."

Our cultural taboos can blind us. The Roman practice was to crucify people naked. But our cultural taboo makes us put a loincloth on Jesus. And all the pictures I've seen of Jesus outside the empty tomb have Him in a long white robe. Do you think that's how Mary saw Him? If we allow our man-made taboos of modesty to censor the Bible, we can lose part of God's message for us. Jesus died on the cross naked for a reason, and His rising that way has something to tell us, too. Death strips us naked, but only to prepare us for resurrection glory.

Death Always Strips Humanity Completely Bare

Death brings us each back to the nakedness we started with. Let's look at the resuscitation of Lazarus in John 11:43-44. "When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." When Lazarus died they removed his regular clothes and apparently wrapped him up only partially in a shroud of linen strips. Now Jesus says, "Take off the grave clothes!" Our cultural taboo would say, "BUT wait! He would be naked!" And they would answer us back, "Yes, just the way he is naked when we see him bathing down at

the river."

Or take the resuscitation of Tabitha in Acts 9:36-41. She was a believer living in Joppa, near the sea, who "became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room." The custom was to bathe the body before wrapping it in a shroud. Peter arrived and "got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive." "BUT wait!" our cultural taboo would protest, "This lady's nude!" And again, they would answer us back, "No more nude than she was when we watched her get baptized down at the ocean!"

Death had completely stripped Lazarus and Tabitha bare. Yes, their resuscitations gave them back their possessions, their clothing, their relationships, but eventually death stripped them bare again. Mary Magdalene, witnessed a new kind of resurrection. Peter and John left the empty tomb, perplexed by the confusing sight of the collapsed shroud still lying right where Jesus had been laid. Mary, lingered, thinking His naked, bruised body had been stolen. Then she saw the risen Christ.

What Mary Soon Witnessed Was Humanity's Hope!

Mary "did not realize that it was Jesus," thinking "he was the gardener." This woman in her culture was used to seeing gardeners working outside naked. That was common. She was not distracted by a naked man, and she wasn't shy about going up to talk to him. What was on her mind was an expectation. She thought she was going after the same bruised, decaying, naked body of the man she had seen wrapped in those empty shroud wrappings. What she discovered was the naked man she was looking for, but instead of her expectation, she found Him fully restored to life and health. Listen. Whatever damage our time spent in this world has done to our bodies, this same resurrection power is offered to us by faith in Christ, who will, as Philippians 3:21 says, "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

Why am I so excited that our Savior died and arose naked? It was His ultimate identification with our human condition. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." That's been our human experience. So, our loving God made that His own experience!

I'm excited, because Jesus, knowing how death strips us naked of everything, let Himself be stripped naked by death. But His stripping by death was in order to destroy the power and fear of death forever. I love these verses, Heb 2:14-15. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

His naked death and resurrection showed us something else that is extremely important. Jesus was dramatically demonstrating that nothing from this world crosses the threshold of death. Paul says in 1 Tim 6:7, "For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." People cling to things in this world, but Jesus said in Luke 9:25, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

Death strips us naked, but only to prepare us for resurrection glory. I wrote a quote when I began my study of nakedness in the Bible: "The highest compliment ever paid to the human body and the clearest commentary on its dignity and worth is the Incarnation of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ." But I have a new one as I close this message: "God's final seal of approval on the human body and His absolute promise of our eternal destiny of inhabiting immortal human flesh is the bodily Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Praise the Lord!... "HE IS RISEN!"