

The Resurrection & Its Meaning

One of the most important things to understand about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, is that the drama of redemption is not complete without the resurrection. This may seem obvious but I remember the day, five years after becoming a Christian, when I realized I had only focused on the fact that Jesus had died for my sins. I had almost never thought about His resurrection for my justification, for my life. He did not just die for my sins; He rose for my life. When He rose, I rose in Him. I had heard it, but it had never reached me.

The drama of redemption is not complete until the resurrection takes place. That is Jesus' victory. He did not just die for our sins; if He merely died, then death has the last word. He rose in victory over His foes—over sin and over death. That is the good news of the resurrection. The resurrection reveals far more of the person and work of Christ than many people realize.

The crucifixion led to death; Jesus really died and was buried. First century tombs had space for about three bodies. Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus' body in a new tomb so His body was the first one laid. Jesus was really dead, and then He really rose again. When I say Jesus rose from the dead, I mean He was resurrected, not just resuscitated. A resuscitation would be Jesus waking up, unwrapping His grave clothes, and walking out of the tomb. But that is not what happened. He passed through His grave clothes. His body did not simply come back to life, but was changed. In the Gospel of Luke the resurrected Jesus can eat and be touched; He had a real body but it was different. People did not recognize Him right away. He was physical and walked around, but He could pass through walls.

It is absolutely essential that we realize this is something that happened to Jesus as a representative of us. Jesus is the first proof of the resurrection. Each garden has a first tomato, a first bean, a first apple, and they tell you the rest are on their way. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the harvest. In this case, the rest of the harvest is delayed until His return. But we are integrally united to Him. His resurrection is connected to us. His resurrection body is somewhat like what our resurrection body will be like. It is essential to the Christian faith to assert the physical resurrection of Christ. If Christianity is not just a religion of ethics, but of redemption, then His resurrection cannot be compromised.

I want to talk about the historical accuracy, the reliability of the Gospel accounts. Historically, people have tried to explain away the resurrection three ways. The first theory is called the "Swoon Theory," which says that Jesus did not really die, but He lapsed into a coma after the beating and was put on the cross. He gained consciousness in the cool tomb, and was revived. There are many problems with this theory. One, Romans were trained executioners; they would have known when their job was done. Two, there are striking eye-witness testimonies to His death, not only from Christian sources but also from Roman sources that say Jesus was executed.

Three, it is ridiculously improbable. It says that after Jesus received two beatings, a lighter one from Pilate and a more severe one from the Roman soldiers—a beating which sometimes killed people before they even got to the cross—He fainted, was nailed to a cross, speared in the side, taken down and wrapped head to toe in cloth, and laid in a tomb that was sealed with a 500 pound stone. The theory asks us to believe that after all this physical trauma, and after having no food or drink for days, Jesus was revived by the cool temperature of the tomb. Somehow He had not been suffocated by the grave clothes and even though His hands were wrapped up too, He was able to unwrap Himself. Then, He somehow pushed the 500 pound stone away, despite His unbelievably weakened and feeble condition, and overpowered the entire guard of Roman soldiers who were watching the tomb, soldiers who knew that if

Jesus escaped they would be killed. Then, if He somehow did all of that, He would have to give people the impression that He was an other-worldly being, so glorious that they would fall to their feet when they saw Him.

The Jewish historian Josephus recorded something that shows the impossibility of this theory. He had originally fought with the Jews in the war against Rome (A.D. 66-70), but switched sides. After the Jews had been vanquished, Titus and his troops started to crucify some Jewish leaders along the road. It was not that rare to do this. As Josephus went down the road, he saw three of his old friends. He told Titus that these were his friends and pleaded that they be removed from their crucifixion after a few minutes. They had not been beaten like Jesus, and they were given the finest medical care from the army, yet two of the three died, just from being crucified. It is inconceivable that Jesus lapsed into a coma and then escaped. It takes more gullibility to believe that than it does to believe a miracle.

The second theory refuting the resurrection is that the body was stolen. The disciples have been accused of overpowering or bribing the Roman guards at Jesus' tomb and stealing the body. The first problem is that, again, the Roman guards could be charged with a capital crime for failing in their duty on their watch. The second problem was that the disciples were in no mood for such an escapade. They were crushed, not energetic. When they first heard the women's accounts of Jesus' resurrection, they did not believe them. So if they could not believe it when they heard it, why would they plot it? Another problem is how this could account for the change in the disciples, from cowardice to bravery. Something had to make them change. They did not change on their own. They were not prone to change. But the biggest problem is that if they stole the body, eventually one of them would have confessed. They were getting no fame, position, or money; they were being hounded and killed, and eventually one of them would have admitted he made it up. It is true that people die for lies. But they do not die very often for lies that they know to be lies, especially if the lie has brought them nothing but pain. People do not do that. There may be one or two who would, but not eleven out of eleven who would die for a lie that got them absolutely nothing.

The third theory against the resurrection is that the disciples had a hallucination. After all, they remembered Jesus and remembered their hopes, but somehow they passed from the idea of hoping He was still alive to the idea that He does live. The problem with that view is that people have hallucinations one by one, not in masses of up to five hundred. It is not common for five hundred people to have the same hallucination at the same time at the same place. In fact, it has never happened. In 2 Corinthians 15:6, Paul says 500 people saw Jesus at one time, and most of the 500 were still alive, as if to tell the Corinthians that they can ask about it themselves. If it was a hallucination, it could be easily disproved. The Romans could get the body as proof.

These are the three classical objections that have been raised for the last 100 years, stemming from an anti-supernatural bias, a closed view of the universe that rejects God and miracles. Even the critics of Christianity recognize how flawed and highly improbable these theories are. Today you will not encounter people who accept these views. More often, people just avoid the subject or blatantly attack the reliability of the Gospels.

The scholar E.P. Sanders said, "I do not regard deliberate fraud as a worthwhile explanation of the resurrection account." So theft is impossible to him. "That the Jesus followers had a resurrection is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences, I do not know." Sanders is called evasive. He says they believed it; he does not think they made it up, but all he can say is that they believed it.

The other view that people take is that the Gospels are grossly unreliable. The person most identified with this position is John Dominic Crossan. He offers this criticism, “The Gospels are fundamentally unreliable. They have virtually nothing you can count on. You can count on the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Q [which is a compilation of sayings of Jesus]. And all we really know about Jesus is what He did.” Crossan and his friends are radical anti-supernaturalists. For them, all we know is that Jesus was influential as a teacher. Crossan says this about Jesus’ body: “Those who cared did not know where it was. And those who knew did not care.” Those who cared, the disciples, fled. And for those who did know, it was just another body to be disposed of. Most likely, they say, Jesus’ body was devoured by ravaging dogs. That is really close to what I would call blasphemy, although it is not ludicrous to say that a dead body might not be buried. It took great courage for Joseph of Arimathea to care for the body of Christ. I do not think Crossan is a fool. I am saying he is an anti-supernaturalist and is against the Christian faith. In a book entitled *Cynic, Sage or Son of God?* Gregory Boyd writes that nothing counts as evidence for the supernatural life of Christ. Once you rule out the possibility of Jesus being God and the possibility of miracles, then you have to come up with something.

In response, we have to show the Gospels are indeed historically reliable. But defending the historicity of what God did in Christ is only half our task. We must also explain what it meant. When I was a pastor, there was a devout woman in the church who was married to an atheist. They got married when they were both non-Christians and around the age of 32, she became a Christian. Her husband came to church to support her sometimes. He had some interest and we went on a camping trip once. We ended up staying awake until one in the morning talking about the Gospels. And by one in the morning, he admitted that Jesus rose from the dead but maintained but did not believe he had to change his life just to follow a man who rose again. Believing in the miracle does not make you a Christian.

There is actually a Jewish rabbi who wrote a book along the same lines. He said that Jesus was a great prophet and God vindicated Him by raising Him from the dead. But that rabbi is not a Christian; he simply believes in a miracle in the case of Jesus. It is vital to affirm the fact of the resurrection but you also have to understand what it means.

So what does the resurrection of Jesus mean? Fundamentally, it means that Jesus is all that He says He is. He claimed, in about a dozen different ways, that He was God. He used divine titles such as the Messiah and the Son of God. He let Himself be called the Son of David. He forgave sins. He claimed to judge the world. He claimed explicitly and implicitly to be God. The resurrection proves that His claims are valid. The claims of Jesus are very impressive, but if He did not rise, then it was just talk. If He said He was God and did not rise, then all this talk is undone. If He does rise, then it is proven that Jesus is all that He says He is.

He said He was a prophet and teacher. The resurrection validates who He is because He said He would die and rise on the third day. As a prophet, He interpreted His work on the cross, saying things like, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” and, “It is finished,” and “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” and so forth. The resurrection also proves that Jesus is fulfilling the great and central task of a priest by offering pleasing sacrifices for sin. What Jesus proves by His resurrection is that the penalty for sin is exhausted on Him. The Old Testament priests had to offer sacrifices over and over, because they never finished dealing with sin. Those sacrifices were a temporary covering. But when Jesus dies and rises, He exhausts the penalty. He bears it and then it is done—there is nothing left. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He died for the sins and rose for their justification. That is what His resurrection proves.

His resurrection also proves that He is king. We hear references in the beginning of the Gospels to Him being a king, such as the words in Matthew that the king of the Jews has been born. But then for a long time, His kingship was hidden; it hardly came up throughout most of the Gospels. At the crucifixion, however, it starts to rise again. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked. Then Pilate put the title over the cross, “The King of the Jews.” When Pilate presented Jesus to the Jews he said, “Behold your king.” He was mocking and jesting, but was actually saying the truth. The soldiers put a crown on His head and a regal purple robe around Him, and mock Him. But Jesus really is king, as is proved by His death and then by His resurrection. By His resurrection, He defeated Satan, sin, and death. He protected His people from the great danger of sin and death. He provided for their welfare by providing eternal life for them. He continued to lead them after His resurrection. So Jesus proves through His resurrection that He is, indeed, King of the Jews.

Matthew begins the story of the resurrection with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary going to “look at the tomb” (Matthew 28:1-11). When they arrive there is an earthquake as an angel descends and rolls the stone away. The tomb was empty. The angel was as white as lightning in his appearance, and the guardsmen shook and became like dead men. The angel told the women not to be afraid, that Jesus had risen just as He said, and they should go quickly to tell the disciples that He is risen. The women who had been told, “Fear not,” were still afraid. Matthew 28:9 says, “They hurried away from the tomb afraid, yet filled with joy.” The authorities then invented a story to conceal the disappearance of Jesus’ body, while the disciples went forward to meet Jesus in Galilee.

What is Matthew trying to teach us? First, he is linking the crucifixion and resurrection scenes together in a variety of ways. He often uses the words “shaking” and “beholding.” For example, it says in 27:55, that the women beheld the crucifixion, and now in 28:1, they come to behold the tomb. They are shaking in 27:51, and the earth shook and the rock split when Jesus died. When Jesus rises, there is a great earthquake when the angel comes, and the guards are also quaking. The same word used for earthquake is used to describe what is happening to the guards.

There is also a thematic interest in fear. There is certainly fear and dread in the crucifixion scene. In the resurrection scene, the guards are afraid and the women are afraid, but the way the fear is addressed is striking. The angel tells the women not to be afraid. Where does that leave the guards? They should be afraid. It is alright for them to be afraid because they are not on the right side of this. The women’s fear is also mixed with joy. They are also told that they should understand what has happened: Jesus has risen, just as He said. He has accomplished what He said He would.

He has also accomplished what the Jewish authorities feared He would. Why were the guards there in the first place? The disciples forgot that Jesus said He would rise, but the authorities remembered, especially the chief priests and Pharisees. So they wanted to make the tomb as secure as possible until the third day, otherwise the disciples might steal the body and tell people He had risen. Pilate tells them to take guards and make the tomb as secure as they knew how. The guards did their best, but bodies passing through rock and angels coming down from heaven cannot be stopped.

After all this, the disciples meet Jesus, and that leads us to the “Great Commission.” That is a very good title, for it is indeed a commission. In the Old Testament, people like Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, and Abraham were commissioned. In these commissioning scenes there are certain elements present: an introduction (setting the scene), a confrontation (God meeting somebody), a reaction, then a charge, and then some assurance that the person can do what he has been commissioned or charged to do. We see

these same themes in the Great Commission.

First, the eleven disciples go to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. As they see Him, some hesitate. Why? It is not because they are unsure whether it is Jesus or not, but rather because they are not quite sure what to do now. So they pause. It is the same word that is used in Matthew 14:31 when Peter hesitated before He walked on water. It was not that they had no faith; it was that they had little faith. The issue here is not wondering if they should believe in Jesus or not, but if they can finish the journey. It is difficult to come all the way, to be sure Jesus is who He says He is, and to be sure they should worship Him. It is not an easy thing to grow to full understanding, to full appreciation, of who Jesus is.

The heart of the commission is sandwiched between a statement of Jesus' power and a promise of His presence. First Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He never lacked authority, but now it has been enlarged. It is as big as the universe and is no longer confined to a ministry to Israel. He is king of heaven and earth and is now going to be served by His disciples. His words may allude to Daniel 7, when the son of man receives an eternal dominion over all the nations. Maybe there is also an allusion to Jesus' confession to Pilate: "Yes [I am the Christ] and from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God, coming on the clouds of heaven." Now He has that authority. Now He will wield it. Now He sits at the right hand of the Father. His vindication begins as His humiliation is coming to an end. His glory is going to become manifest as the church spreads. As the disciples fulfill His commission, Daniel 7:27 says, "The nations will submit to the glorious son of man." Daniel may not be entirely clear whether the nations submit willingly or not, but in the book of Revelation, we understand that when Jesus returns, everyone will submit—willingly or unwillingly. As Paul says, "Every knee shall bow down and every tongue shall confess," willingly or unwillingly (Philippians 2:10). But now, in this age until the last day, it is the responsibility of the disciples to get the message of the authoritative Christ, out to the nations so that they will submit willingly. Their job is to make willing converts to the new king.

After this announcement of the beginning of Jesus' reign, Jesus comes to the heart of the commission. Some people think that the greatest thing a Christian can do is to witness, to evangelize, to convert someone. But Jesus says it is to make disciples, which means to take people to the point that they love the Lord with all their heart and strength and can teach others about that too. It involves being God's instrument in bringing that person to faith, then to maturity, then to the point they can lead others to Christ, who will in turn lead others to Christ. A literal translation of Jesus' words would be, "Therefore going, making the disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them..." Notice the three participles: "going," "baptizing," and "teaching." So the main thing is to make disciples, and you do this in three ways: going, baptizing, and teaching. "Going"—you do not wait for people to come to you, but you go to them. "Baptizing"—people make a public recognizable commitment to the Christian faith and repudiate the Roman gods. "Teaching"—instructing people to obey everything Jesus commanded, not just some things.

One person said to me if you want to know what God is saying to the church today, go to your Bible and read everything that is not underlined. There is a really good chance that what you have underlined is what you like. And there is a good chance that what you like is palatable in your culture. So go to parts you do not like and read them, and maybe you will see what is important. Obey everything, whatever it may be; that is the test of discipleship.

How do you make the nations into disciples? How do you teach them everything? Go back to the

beginning of Matthew's Gospel and start reading, since it is the Gospel with teaching material in it. Go back to the Sermon on the Mount if you want to know how to live out the character of the disciple. Go back to Matthew 10 if you want to know what missions are about. Go to chapter 13 if you want to know about the kingdom. Go to chapter 18 if you want to learn about community life. Go back to chapters 23-25 if you want to know how to be ready for Lord's return and how to use your gifts.

Following this central aspect of the commission is Jesus' promise, "Surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." God's presence is there; we have that assurance. You can fulfill this commission because He will always be with you; that is the promise of the Gospel. That is the conclusion of the message.

This passage tells us what we should look for in our pastors and churches. People have many conceptions of a spiritual leader and some are only quasi-Christian. Some think that pastors are insurance agents who will ensure that you will be okay at the end. Or they are looked at as policemen to restore order. Those are sub-Christian ideas. There are also some valid ideas. Some look to their pastor as a father figure who shows them how to live. That idea is not all wrong, but it is not all right either. Some look to a pastor as a role model or a spiritual mentor. That idea is better.

I would like to give you a different picture, that of a coach or a private instructor in something like piano, violin, painting, or a sport. The good coach has played the game or instrument and so there is an aspect of being a role model. You want to learn the sport from somebody who has played the sport well. But the instructor also explains it to you. He says, "Here is what I am doing and here is why I do it well." He does not just say, "Watch me play the piano." He plays the piano and explains what he just did. And a really good coach wants his student to beat him. Good coaches want their students to be better than they are someday; they want them to go farther. The goal is not for people to look at their Christian leaders to try to someday be as good as the leader. We are all striving for Christ so the idea is not to make little clones of ourselves, but to make disciples who go as far towards Christ as possible. The goal is to make disciples not of the leader, but of Christ.