

Pentwater Bible Church

Resurrection Sunday 2014

Daniel E. Woodhead

On Easter we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ from the dead. In the resurrection we see that Jehovah God sent Himself, a suffering servant (Isaiah 49-57), in the body of a man to atone for the sins of the world. His suffering reached a level of pain before and during the crucifixion that we cannot imagine as He bore the sins of the world and the cosmic realm as well. He met with the powers of darkness in the cosmic realm, which He battled and won the war (Luke 22: 53). Satan tried all he could to prevent Christ's crucifixion. The death He experienced cleansed the heavenly tabernacle (Hebrews 9: 23-26), which Lucifer polluted with his sin and fall, as well as providing for the salvation of all who would believe the gospel of Christ (II Corinthians 5: 21). Paul describes a situation that still exists today, doubt about the resurrection.

I Corinthians 15: 12-20a

¹² Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from

the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁴ And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. ¹⁵ Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. ¹⁶ For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁷ And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸ Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. ²⁰ But now Christ is risen from the dead (NKJV).

Paul’s prayer for the Corinthians is real specific. Some were denying the resurrection without any evidence. They simply said, “resurrections don’t occur.” Unbelievers say the same thing today. They say it couldn’t have happened because resurrections just

don't happen. Paul goes on to say that if there are no resurrections then Christ did not rise from the dead and our only hope is to trust in the powers of this world. If that were true our faith is misplaced in a false hope of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore we would be the most miserable lot in the world because the world only offers, among other troubles death, divorce, financial hardship, health problems, wars, tyranny and strained relationships. He concludes this passage with the strong assertion that Christ *is* risen from the dead. It is a matter of historical fact. The resurrection of Christ is the only hope for the world that there is remediation for the sinful decaying and dying world we live in. There is no other way out of the decay and sin we live in. God Himself provided the way. We only have to recognize that this really happened and accept it as fact.

Paul's also offered a prayer for the Ephesian believers, which is very specific. He asks God to bestow upon them a deeper knowledge and understanding of Christ that we today must also

experience. This is not something that one can learn in a seminary or even in a Bible study or from reading devotional books. Paul's desire for them was that they would *willingly* receive from God *"the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ"* (Ephesians 1:17-23).

Specifically, Paul prays that they would know the "exceeding greatness" of the power that God wanted to demonstrate in their lives. His explanation of this power is crucial for us to realize. He called it the "power of his resurrection."

Philippians 3: 10-12

¹⁰ *That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* ¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* ¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own (ESV).*

Was Paul uncertain of his salvation, concerned that he might not qualify for the resurrection of believers at the Rapture? Hardly! He is telling us that the Resurrection of Christ is not only a historical event that we look back to with satisfaction and joy. It is the greatest event in the history (past, present, or future) of the entire cosmos!

The greatest event that the universe has or will ever see is also one of the most difficult for most people to understand. In fact, Paul tells us that the Resurrection is the greatest display of God's power ever to be demonstrated, nor can it ever be surpassed. Consider the following from Richard Dawkins, leader of the New Atheist movement: He was debating John Lennox, a fervent Christian, also an Oxford professor and scientist with two earned Ph.D.'s, who in his closing remarks testified to his faith in Christ and to our Lord's resurrection:

"Yes, well, that concluding bit," said Dawkins, lips curled in contempt, voice dripping with venom, "rather gives the game away, doesn't it? All that stuff about science and physics...that's all very grand and wonderful, and then suddenly we come down to the resurrection of Jesus. It's so petty, it's so trivial, it's so local, it's so earthbound, and it's so unworthy of the universe."

Yet God calls the Resurrection the greatest display that could ever be known of His majesty and power.

For centuries many of the world's distinguished philosophers have assaulted Christianity as being irrational, superstitious and absurd. Many have chosen simply to ignore the central issue of the resurrection. Others have tried to explain it away through various theories. But the historical evidence just can't be discounted. And evidence is what proves a historical event to our logical minds. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is either one of the most wicked,

vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted on the minds of human beings - or it is the most remarkable fact of history.

Frequently, authors will avoid using the Bible as history, citing it as historiographically unreliable.¹ It is unfortunate that they do so without any evidence. Just as Paul told us in I Corinthians 15, they simply say those things could not have happened. Historians react angrily or contemptuously to the suggestion that such events as miracles have occurred in the past and may occur in the present. Most historians assume that what is beyond their personal experiences cannot be true. But essential to the method of history is suspending prejudice and weighing the veracity of reports.

Academic historians often say the following: there can be no historical evidence for the Resurrection because we have ruled such an event beyond the limits of historical evidence. In other

¹ Cantor, Norman F. *The Sacred Chain*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994, 3.

words they say that no evidence can exist outside what they have already defined as historical evidence.

Simon Greenleaf was a decorated professor of evidence at the Harvard Law School in the mid 1800's. By using the standards of evidence he proved the Bible to be an accurate historical document. Greenleaf argued for the elimination of prejudices allowing evidence to tell its story. This is simply placing a reliance on evidence. He stated that one should, " follow the truth wherever it may lead us."² Here are some of the facts relevant to the resurrection:

1. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet who claimed to be the Christ prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, was arrested, was judged a political criminal, and was crucified. Three days after His death and burial, some women who went to His tomb found the body gone. In subsequent weeks, His

² Greenleaf, Simon. *Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*, 1846. Reprint Newark, NJ: Soney & Sage, 1903, 1.

disciples claimed that God had raised Him from the dead and that He appeared to them various times before ascending into heaven. From that foundation, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and has continued to exert great influence down through the centuries.

2. The New Testament accounts of the resurrection were being circulated within the lifetimes of men and women alive at the time of the resurrection. Those people could certainly have confirmed or denied the accuracy of such accounts.
3. The writers of the four Gospels either had themselves been witnesses or else were relating the accounts of eyewitnesses of the actual events. In advocating their case for the gospel, a word that means "good news," the apostles appealed (even when confronting their most severe opponents) to common knowledge concerning the facts of the resurrection. If it did not happen the opponents would have been sure to refute any claims of Jesus resurrection.

4. Because the New Testament provides the primary historical source for information on the resurrection, many critics during the 19th century attacked the reliability of these biblical documents. By the end of the 19th century, however, archaeological discoveries had confirmed the accuracy of the New Testament manuscripts. Discoveries of early papyri bridged the gap between the time of Christ and existing manuscripts from a later date. Interestingly no one for the first three hundred years denied the resurrection. That is because everybody knew it.
5. Coinciding with the papyri discoveries, an abundance of other manuscripts came to light (over 24,000 copies of early New Testament manuscripts are known to be in existence today). The historian Luke wrote of "authentic evidence" concerning the resurrection. William M. Ramsay, a Scottish archaeologists tried to refute Luke's account and could not find the evidence to do so. "After a lifetime of study, however, he concluded: "The reversal of our judgment then

was complete. We had imagined that this detail was a blunder due to stupidity or ignorance or misplaced ingenuity on the part of the author: It has been found to show excellent knowledge and the minute accuracy which comes from the faithful report of an eye-witness and participator in the action”³

6. The New Testament witnesses were fully aware of the hostile perpetrators of Christ’s crucifixion. The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance. Roman guards who were

³ Ramsay, William M. *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on The Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, New York, Toronto 1915 p.79. Accessed at Internet Archive April 6, 2012 <http://archive.org/stream/bearingofrecentd00ramsuoft#page/78/mode/2up>

strictly disciplined fighting men were stationed to guard the tomb. These guards affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher. Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb's entrance would have broken the seal and thus met with death by the guards. But three days later the tomb was empty. The followers of Jesus said He had risen from the dead. They reported that He appeared to them during a period of forty days, showing Himself to them by many "infallible proofs." Paul the apostle recounted that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers at one time, the majority of whom were still alive and who could confirm what Paul wrote. So many security precautions were taken with the trial, crucifixion, burial, entombment, sealing, and guarding of Christ's tomb that it becomes very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead.

7. The tomb was empty. Both Jewish and Roman sources admit an empty tomb. Those resources range from Josephus to a

compilation of fifth-century Jewish writings called the "Toledoth Jeshu." Evidence from a hostile source is the strongest kind of historical evidence. In essence, this means that if a source admits a fact decidedly not in its favor, then that fact is genuine."

8. Josh McDowell writes in The Resurrection Factor, "In the Mark 16:4 portion of the Bezae manuscripts in the Cambridge Library in England, a parenthetical statement was found that adds, 'And when He was laid there, he (Joseph) put against the tomb a stone which 20 men could not roll away.'" ⁴ If the stone weighed that much, how then could Joseph of Arimathea roll the stone into place by himself? Probably the stone was on an incline and wedged maybe with another stone. After finishing the burial of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea would have removed the wedged stone, pushed the large stone down the incline, and let it roll into place in front of the entrance to the tomb. Therefore the stone must

⁴ McDowell, John. *The Resurrection Factor*, Here's Life Publisher, San Bernardino, CA 1981 pg. 53.

have been rolled up a slope away not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. It was in such a position that it looked as if it had been picked up and carried away. If the disciples had wanted to come in, tiptoe around the sleeping guards, and then roll the stone over and steal Jesus' body, how could they have done that without the guard's awareness? The Roman guards fled. They left their place of responsibility. How can their fleeing be explained, when Roman military discipline was so exceptional? Fear of punishment produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches.

9. Christ appeared alive on several occasions after the cataclysmic events of that first Easter. When studying an event in history, it is important to know whether enough people who were participants or eyewitnesses to the event were alive when the facts about the event were first published. To know this ascertains the accuracy of the published report. If the number of eyewitnesses is substantial,

the event can be regarded as fairly well established. For instance, if we all witness a murder, and a later police report turns out to be a fabrication of lies, we as eyewitnesses can refute it.

10. A theory advanced by Kirsopp Lake in 1907⁵ assumes that the women who reported that the body was missing had mistakenly gone to the wrong tomb. If so, then the disciples who went to check up on the women's statement must have also gone to the wrong tomb. We may be certain, however, that Jewish authorities, who asked for a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen, would not have been mistaken about the location. Nor would the Roman guards, because they were there! If the resurrection-claim was merely because of a geographical mistake, the Jewish authorities would have lost no time in producing the body from the proper tomb, thus effectively quenching for all time any rumor resurrection. Further,

⁵ Kirsopp Lake, *The Historical Evidence For The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Putnam's, 1907), 250-253.

Joseph of Arimathea the tomb owner knew which tomb was his and so did Nicodemus who helped him bury the body. They never affirmed the soldiers were at the wrong tomb or the women went to the wrong one either.

11. But the most compelling testimony of all must be the lives of those early Christians. We have to ask ourselves: What caused them to go everywhere telling the message of the risen Christ? Had there been any visible benefits to them in doing so? Did they receive wealth, increased social status or material benefits? As a reward for their efforts, however, those early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured and crucified. Every conceivable method was used to stop them from talking. Yet, they laid down their lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.

Easter is the day that Jesus of Nazareth rose, in his body, from the dead. He came back from the dead in an immortal resurrected

body. This was not a person being revived in the same body. His new body is one of permanence. Easter is crucial to every person of this earth because if Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity is false: it must go. But if He did rise from the dead, that is the single most important event in all of time. None of us can escape the power of the claim of the Resurrection. If Christ did not rise, then our own lives as Paul says will be miserable because we are still living with no hope in a sinful existence. To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is to believe on a historically reliable event in human history. Personal commitment is the issue though.

Many people refuse to believe in the resurrection exactly for the reason that if they do, it will change their lives. They do not want to stop doing what they are doing in their lives that are contrary to the teachings of Christ. So belief becomes not an issue of whether the Resurrection occurred or not. It becomes an issue of leaving the captivity of Satan and entering the deliverance of Christ. Jesus said that whomever sins is a slave to sin (John 8: 34). We think our sins

are so secretive that no one knows them. When confronted with the truth of Christ many shy away from a commitment due to sin. We don't want them uncovered and go to extreme lengths to cover them even feigning unbelief in the historicity of the resurrection.

We are separated from God by our sin and we are sinners by nature. Our sin may seem like a small thing to humankind, but the God of the universe does not think so. The Bible says that God is *"of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity"* (Habakkuk 1:13). We are so imperfect and sinful that even when we try to do good works, we fail to please God. In God's sight *"we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousness' are as filthy rags"* (Isaiah 64:6). The worst news for the world is that sin keeps people out of heaven. There is only eternal damnation for those who do not believe.

Revelation 21:27 is speaking of heaven when it says, *"And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither*

whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie.” Even one lie would keep us from entering heaven. Most people think that if they don’t believe something then it is not true. Which is in fact not true. Truth is not individually determined. There is absolute truth. Which is, something that is true in all times and in all places. The Resurrection of Christ is true and what Jesus said about the penalty for sin (eternal death) is true.

Salvation is not church membership. It is not good works. We cannot add baptism, the sacraments, confirmation, or any other good work to Christ’s finished work on Calvary. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Works cannot save us. Salvation is when one says, “I realize that none of these things can save me—but only Jesus can save me—and I take Him—and only Him—to be my personal Savior.”

Through the Risen Christ we are reminded that by His death and suffering we are saved to eternal life with Him when we leave these bodies. What a wonderful blessing we have in Christ. Share it with those who do not know or believe in Him. The world still needs this message more so now than ever.

Daniel E. Woodhead