

A Non-Easter Resurrection Sermon

Acts 26:1-18; Romans 1:4

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We address the centrality of Christ's glorious resurrection in Paul's testimony before King Agrippa today, not because today is Easter Sunday (a day not appointed as a holy day in God's Word), but because today is the Lord's Day (a day appointed as the only holy day in the New Testament wherein we celebrate the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ 52 Lord's Days a year).

That which most dramatically separated the religion of the Jewish Sanhedrin from that of the Apostle Paul was the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul declares that his preaching (as well as mine) and his faith in Jesus (as well as yours) would be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). We might as well go home today. In fact, Paul says that he (and all of us) would yet be in our sins and under the condemnation of God (1 Corinthians 15:17). "Let's not give a thought to anything or anyone because it doesn't matter. Let's just live it up."

Christ's resurrection is not only central to Paul's testimony, it is central to all of history. All the purposes of God for this world and in your life will be realized because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. All of God's plans and purposes for you, His people, hinged upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Had Jesus remained in that grave, all hope of redemption, all hope of God's victory over every enemy, all hope of God working good out of evil, all hope of eternal life would be gone. But praise God, He is alive! His tomb is empty. He has overcome sin, death, and Satan for you. All His and your enemies are defeated and all your needs are met in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

This Lord's Day (not Easter Day), let us consider the centrality of Christ's resurrection in Paul's testimony before Agrippa. The main points are these: (1) The Resurrected Christ Appears to Paul (Acts 26:1-15); (2) The Resurrected Christ Commissions Paul (Acts 26:16-18).

I. The Resurrected Christ Appears to Paul (Acts 26:1-15).

A. By way of review, when King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, made their congratulatory visit to welcome Festus as the new Roman governor, Festus took the opportunity to make known to Agrippa Paul's case and the dilemma Festus faced with Paul's case. For Paul was found innocent of any crime by Felix, the previous Roman governor, and now by Festus as well. But Festus sought to do the Jews a favor by asking Paul if he would return to Jerusalem to be tried there. Paul refused and rather appealed to Caesar. Festus then had no lawful recourse but to send Paul to Rome, since Paul was a Roman citizen. But Festus was in a dilemma because he was sending Paul to Rome to appear before Caesar though he was not charged with any crime. When Agrippa and Bernice arrive, Festus sees help in Agrippa, who is noted to be somewhat of an expert in Jewish customs and questions. Agrippa indicates that he would like to hear Paul before he is sent off to Rome. Both Festus and Agrippa are satisfied. Paul is called forward to speak, and most of Acts 26 is devoted to Paul's testimony before Agrippa and Festus (and other dignitaries present).

B. Agrippa gives permission for Paul to speak (Acts 26:1), and Paul begins by noting that he is glad to be able to give his testimony before Agrippa, knowing that Agrippa is by profession a Jew and is also well acquainted with Jewish laws and customs (Acts 26:2-3).

C. Paul gives Agrippa a little background information about his Jewish upbringing and training as a Pharisee, which Paul says is known also to his accusers in the Jewish Sanhedrin (Acts 26:4-5). This biographical

knowledge was deemed necessary in order to demonstrate that Paul was not inclined in the least to Jesus by way of his training as a Jew, or as a rabbi who was taught by the most eminent rabbi at that time, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), or as a Pharisee which was the most strict sect among the Jews. He was in no wise looking for Jesus or being taught by those who followed Jesus. He was not in any way predisposed to follow Jesus Christ. To the contrary, as we will soon see, he was the enemy of Jesus Christ. Yet the resurrected Jesus appeared to him and saved him.

D. Paul now takes a brief intermission from his biography to declare why he was accused by the Jews and brought before the Roman bar for judgment (Acts 26:6-8).

1. Putting aside all the false accusations brought against Paul that the Sanhedrin could not prove and could not produce even one witness to substantiate, Paul goes to the heart of the disagreement between him and the Jewish Sanhedrin: the resurrected Jesus Christ is the Messiah. This was the ancient hope of their fathers Paul says (Acts 26:6) that was revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53; Psalm 16:10-11).

2. Every Jew that believed in all of the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 26:7) had this same hope of the coming Messiah as did Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the prophets. So what was the problem between Paul and the Jews? Paul and his fellow Christians believed God had already kept His promise in the coming of Jesus Christ, who was revealed to be the Messiah and God's Only Begotten Son by His powerful resurrection (Romans 1:4). You see, Paul is demonstrating that Christianity is not a different religion from that which was practiced by the Jewish fathers in the Old Testament, but is essentially the same religion, having the same God, the same Messiah, the same gospel, and the same hope and resurrection. It was not Paul that left the religion of their Old Testament forefathers, it was rather the Jews that had done so.

3. Paul asks Agrippa a question that to a Jew who accepted the Old Testament Scriptures as God's Word should have been rather obvious (Acts 26:8). Paul is saying, "Should it be incredible unbelievable that God should raise the dead since it was the hope of Job (Job 19:25-27), David (Psalm 16:10-11), Isaiah (Isaiah 26:19), Daniel (Daniel 12:2)? Most of the Jews (even the Pharisees) had no problem believing that God raises the dead in general; they just didn't believe in Christ's resurrection in particular. That same unbelief is yet maintained by skeptics and unbelievers today as it was by the Jews in Paul's time. Consider a few.

a. **Objection #1.** Jesus was not a real person, was not crucified, and certainly was not raised from the dead.

(1) The gospels were written within the generation of those who were then living (at least Matthew, Mark, and Luke). There were many eye-witnesses Paul says then living who could verify this truth (1 Corinthians 15). For the Bible-believing Christian, it is enough that God clearly reveals the resurrection of Jesus Christ in Scripture, for God who gave us the Scriptures cannot lie. Even the Jews in Paul's time did not deny that Jesus lived, was crucified, and was buried.

(2) Early Jewish and Roman historians within the first century confirm Jesus as an historical figure who was crucified by Pilate (Josephus and Tacitus in particular).

b. **Objection #2.** Jesus never really died on the cross. He only appeared to be dead. Therefore, he could not rise from the dead if He was never dead in the first place.

(1) This is contrary to all of the historic testimony found in the New Testament Scriptures and even extra-biblical non-Christian sources. Again, even unbelieving Jews believed Jesus was crucified upon the cross.

(2) Why did the Roman soldiers not break the legs of Christ as they did the thieves on either side of Him? Because He was already dead (John 19:32-33). The body would not have been given by Pilate to Joseph of Arimathea to be buried if he was still breathing.

(3) Joseph and Nicodemus would not have wrapped and buried the Lord

Jesus if there was the slightest sign of life.

(4) Furthermore, assuming for the sake of argument that Christ did not die, how could He have removed the huge stone by Himself in such an emaciated and weakened state, and how could He have escaped without the Roman soldiers hearing Him? Moreover, how could such a weak and frail man, having suffered what He had suffered (with the extensive loss of blood), have convinced anyone that he had been raised from the dead?

c. **Objection #3.** The Disciples of Christ stole the body by night.

(1) This is the lie begun by the Jewish Sanhedrin to account for the missing body of Jesus from the tomb (Matthew 26:56).

(2) The cowardly Disciples of Christ would hardly be candidates to risk their lives by taking on the Roman soldiers that were guarding the tomb.

(3) If the Disciples of Christ did steal the body of Christ, how did they move the enormous stone from the entrance to the tomb without waking the Roman soldiers (since they were all supposed to be asleep, which is preposterous considering they could put to death).

(4) Does it make any sense at all that these cowardly disciples would have subsequently had the boldness to proclaim to all of their enemies a lie (namely, that Christ was risen from the dead) and to willingly lay down their lives as martyrs for that which they knew to be a lie? People do not suffer and die for that which they know to be a lie, which they themselves have fabricated. This is not reasonable at all.

d. **Objection #4.** There was no resurrection at all because those who went to the tomb in the first place went mistakenly to the wrong tomb (a tomb that never had a body in it and therefore was empty).

(1) The women had been at the tomb of Christ just on Friday evening and knew exactly where the tomb was (Matthew 27:61).

(2) And if the women went to the wrong tomb, why didn't the Jewish leaders go to the right tomb and produce the body of Christ and put an early end to Christianity? They certainly were able to find the right tomb in as much as they had placed Roman guards around the tomb in order to secure it just the day before.

(3) Certainly Joseph of Arimathea would have been able to find the right tomb (since it was his tomb) and to produce the body of Christ, if the women had gone to the wrong tomb.

e. Ultimately it is not because there is not enough evidence for Christ's resurrection from the New Testament and sources outside of Scripture; it is because the minds of unbelievers are darkened by their unbelief. It is not so much an academic problem as much as it is a spiritual problem (Luke 16:31). In fact, the Jewish leaders knew Jesus was raised from the dead, and yet invented a lie to deny it. People do not want to believe, because the consequences of a resurrected Jesus Christ would mean He is the Son of God and all that He taught was the truth (John 14:6). Jesus said His resurrection would confirm who He was and all that He taught and accomplished on the cross for believing sinners. His resurrection would also confirm the judgment that awaits those who will not fall upon His mercy. If Christ is raised from the dead, all of their mere human wisdom and supposed sovereignty over their own lives must quake in fear and act like dead men (just as did the Roman soldiers). Christ's resurrection is the salvation of all who believe in Him and is the condemnation of all who will not believe in Him. The answer to Paul's question in Acts 26:8 is, "No, it should not be incredible that God raises the dead, and especially that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead."

E. Paul returns to his biographical testimony and gives one of the clearest evidences that he did not become a Christian because he was in some way attracted to Christ or to Christians. He hated and despised Christ and Christians and sought to destroy them from the face of the earth (Acts 26:9-11). He was the grand inquisitor for the Jewish Sanhedrin in chasing down Christians like wild animals, arresting them,

imprisoning them, torturing them with the scourge so as to force them to blaspheme Jesus Christ, and consenting to their murder. How did Paul move past these sins and memories? How do you move on from your past sins and failures? Certainly not by pretending you did not sin. There must be honest confession of sin and guilt and saving faith in the love and power of God's forgiveness and mercy in Christ Jesus from which flow grief and sorrow and new obedience. The certainty of God's forgiveness comes from your Savior who died for every one of those sins (whether great or small in your estimation) and was raised to demonstrate they were forgiven and was raised to empower you to remember the past (to keep you humble), but not to dwell in the past (but to look always to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus).

F. Paul's conversion unmistakably evidences the centrality of Christ's resurrection from the dead, for it was while he was breathing out hatred for Christ and Christians and on his way to find more of them in Damascus (Acts 26:12) that the resurrected Jesus in His infinite love appeared to Paul and gave him new life and opened his blind eyes to receive the resurrected Lord Jesus as Lord and Savior even when he was not looking for Christ (Acts 26:13-15). Paul's chief argument for Christ being the Messiah is His resurrection from the dead. It was Jesus who was looking for Paul, not Paul who was looking for Jesus. It was Jesus who first loved Paul, not Paul who first loved Jesus. It was Jesus who gave Paul faith to believe, not Paul who first had faith to believe in Jesus. God's love, the gift of faith, and the will to do God's good pleasure were all first given to Paul, and then Paul believed, loved, and obeyed the Lord Jesus.

II. The Resurrected Christ Commissions Paul (Acts 26:16-18).

A. Jesus saved Paul and then commissioned Paul to serve Him, love Him, and obey Him, not to serve and love himself, and do whatever pleased Paul. Paul's commission is indeed a special commission as an apostolic minister of Jesus Christ to whom the resurrected Christ appeared (Acts 26:16-18), but Jesus Christ has likewise appointed His ministers as the means He would use through the preaching of the gospel to open blind eyes and to set prisoners free from the world, the flesh, and the devil. To the degree you love, encourage, pray for, and support the ministry of your pastor who preaches the gospel and the good and holy commandments of the Lord to you, to that degree you show how much you love the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Lord Jesus who commissioned him and sent him forth to do so.

B. The gospel that opens eyes and sets prisoners free is that same gospel that brings forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 26:18). It is not you that opens your eyes. It is not you that sets yourself free from sin, addictions, the love of this world and the flesh. It is not you that must forgive yourself. It is the resurrected Jesus Christ.

C. Dear friend, there is no doubt that you can be forgiven regardless of your sins, if Paul the chief of sinners was forgiven, if Peter the denier of Christ was forgiven, if doubting Thomas was forgiven, if David the adulterer and murderer was forgiven, or if the Disciples of Jesus, who debated among themselves who was the greatest, were forgiven. Never ever put yourself outside the power of the resurrected Christ to forgive you and set you apart as an undeserving saint to whom He shall give a glorious and everlasting inheritance reserved for you in heaven. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means there is nothing impossible or too hard for Jesus to do, regardless of the sin, the affliction, the trial, the heartbreak, or the threats brought against you. There is always the certainty of hope because Jesus Christ is alive!

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