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## WHAT TO DO IF THE RESURRECTION IS TRUE

Acts 17:30-34

By

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Easter Sunday

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A woman who works for the Internal Revenue Service was responsible to communicate with delinquent taxpayers. On one occasion, to get in touch with a man, she had to call Anchorage, Alaska, and was patched through to a ham operator in the Aleutian Islands. Two hours later the ham operator raised the taxpayer's home base and from there reached him at sea with his fishing fleet. After identifying herself as being with the IRS in Utah, there was a long pause. Then over the static from somewhere in the North Pacific came: "Ha! Ha! Come and get me!" (*Reader's Digest*, [10/82].)

A lot of Americans shrug off the idea of God's judgment like that delinquent taxpayer shrugged off the IRS. I suppose they would agree that someday there will be a day of reckoning, but that seems far, far away. So they ignore it and go on about their lives.

These same folks would probably view Easter as an innocuous spring holiday. If you said the word "Easter" and asked them to tell you what words popped into their mind in association with it, you might hear things like resurrection, Sunrise Service, hope, spring-time, flowers, Easter lilies, new clothes, Easter egg hunts, Easter bunnies, dinner with family and friends. It would never occur to them to connect Easter Sunday and God's judgment on their sin. Easter has such a positive, upbeat connotation. Judgment has such a negative, unpleasant connotation. They don't seem to go together.

But the Apostle Paul made just such a connection. In Acts 17:30-34, he is concluding his sermon to the philosophers in Athens. Paul takes a logical approach. He is saying,

If the resurrection is true, then judgment is a certainty;  
if judgment is a certainty, then repentance is a necessity.

The message of Easter is that Jesus Christ is risen bodily from the dead. Paul says that if Jesus is risen, then He is the judge of the

whole world. This puts a demand on every person--each one must turn to God from sin ("repent").

1. If the resurrection is true, then judgment is a certainty.

The whole thing hangs on the assertion that ...

A. The resurrection is true.

This is the foundation of Christianity. Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless ..." (1 Cor. 15:17). Christianity is not built on religious speculations, but on the revelation God has given of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The authenticating proof that Jesus is Lord and Judge is that God raised Him from the dead.

The proofs of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ are many and they have withstood the attacks of critics for almost 2,000 years. I can't go into detail, but I briefly mention some of the proofs:

(1) The empty tomb--This fact is not disputed, even by critics. If the tomb had not been empty, when the disciples started preaching the resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish leaders would have marched to the tomb, produced the body, and the disciples would have been laughed out of town. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, there are several explanations of the empty tomb, none of which are plausible:

--Jesus' enemies stole the body. But, they had no motive for doing so, and they would have produced it to quench the disciples' preaching if they had known where it was. Besides, the tomb was guarded to prevent any theft of the body.

--The Roman guards stole the body. But they had no motive to do so. They didn't care about this Jewish religious trial. If they had stolen the body, they could have sold it for a lot of money to the Jewish leaders, but that didn't happen.

--The disciples stole the body. This was the theory the Jewish leaders tried to promote (Matt. 27:63-66; 28:11-15). But, the Roman guards would have prevented this. They would not have risked their lives (the penalty for not properly standing their watch) for a bribe. The disciples' couldn't have moved the heavy stone and stolen the body out from under the noses of the guards.

Besides, the disciples were too depressed, confused, and fearful to pull off a daring grave robbery. And if they had, would they have gone out and preached the resurrection, even with threats against their lives? In fact, the initial thought of the women and disciples was that someone had taken the body (John 20:13, 15). If they had confirmed that fact, they wouldn't have preached as they did later on.

(2) The post-resurrection appearances--There were numerous appearances of Jesus to many of His followers in a variety of situations over the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension into heaven. These many witnesses could not possibly have fabricated their story. J. N. D. Anderson wrote:

The most drastic way of dismissing the evidence would be to say that these stories were mere fabrications, that they were pure lies. But so far as I know, not a single critic today would take such an attitude. In fact, it would really be an impossible position. Think of the number of witnesses, over 500. Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence--and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense. (Cited by Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 233.)

Anderson's quote leads to a third proof:

(3) The changed lives of the witnesses--None of this depressed, confused, fearful band were expecting a resurrection. And yet they were all transformed into bold, committed witnesses who gave their lives to preaching that Jesus was raised from the dead. Paul himself was transformed from a vicious persecutor of the church and hater of Gentiles to the dedicated apostle to the Gentiles after he saw the risen Jesus Christ on the Damascus road.

That's just a quick overview of some of the evidence for the resurrection. Maybe you're thinking, "Well if the evidence is so convincing, why don't more people believe it?" The answer is: People refuse to believe in the resurrection because it has moral implications. If Jesus is risen, He is Lord. If He is Lord, then I have no right to continue rebelling against God by running my own life. The main issue in unbelief is never intellectual; it is always moral. If Jesus is risen, then I must turn from my sin, because He is going to judge the world. If the resurrection is true, then ...

B. Judgment is a certainty.

Paul notes three certainties (17:31) with regard to the judgment: A certain day, a certain standard, and a certain Man.

(1) A Certain Day--God "has fixed a day ...." We look around and see wickedness going unpunished and think that sinners get away with their sin. But the court date is set in heaven: God has a certain day when He will judge the world! If we ask, "Why does God wait?" the answer is, "Because He is patient and merciful. He is giving those who have sinned against Him an opportunity to repent" (2 Pet. 3:9).

At the Mount Saint Helens visitor center in Washington, a film tells the story of the awesome eruption of that volcano in 1980. It shows the now famous longtime resident at Spirit Lake, an old man named Harry Truman, who disbelieved the warnings that the mountain was about to blow. He's famous now, but dead and buried under hundreds of feet of lava, because he made the fatal mistake of thinking that just because that mountain had never erupted in his many years of living there, it never would.

Many people make that eternally fatal mistake when it comes to the warnings of Scripture about God's judgment. Paul points out that God "overlooked the times of ignorance." Perhaps you have been ignorant of the demands of God's absolute righteousness; you haven't been aware of your own sin; you haven't known about God's means of forgiveness. If He had judged the world before now, you would have been lost. But don't wait--the day is certain!

(2) A Certain Standard--"He will judge the world in righteousness." Many think that God will grade on the curve, that only the scum of the earth will fail. Just last month I heard on National

Public Radio about a recent Gallup Poll in which 60 percent of Americans say they believe in hell, but only four percent think there's a good chance that they will go there. We don't think we will go to hell because we compare ourselves with other people and we don't stack up too badly. We assume that God grades on the curve, so everything will be okay.

Years ago, when poet Robert Frost taught at Amherst College, he detested semester exams and grading, but since it was mandatory, he complied. But he made the tests as easy as he could. Once he asked only one question: "What good did my course do you?" and requested brief replies. One student wrote, "Not a dam bit!" "Did you pass him?" asked a friend. "Yes," said Frost, "I gave him a 90." "Why not 100?" the friend asked. "He left the 'n' off damn."

Many think that God will be an easy grader, like Robert Frost. Unless we're horribly bad people, the judgment won't be any sweat. But God's standard is His own character--absolute righteousness! That character is reflected in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Many people think that they live up to this standard. But have you ever thought about how impossibly high that standard is?

Take the first commandment: Can you look at your life and honestly say that you have not in the past and you do not now have any gods before the One True God? Or take the simple "Golden Rule": Can you say that you always do unto others as you would have them do unto you? If not, you've broken the two commands that sum up God's holy standard: You have not loved God with all your heart and you have not loved your neighbor as yourself. God's certain standard is His own righteousness. Unless you somehow satisfy that standard, you have much to fear when that certain day of judgment comes around!

There is a certain day and a certain standard.

(3) A Certain Man--"Through a Man whom He has appointed." That may seem strange--usually we think of God as the judge, not man. But the final Judge is both. The Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal God who took on human flesh through the virgin birth. Jesus said that the Father had given all judgment to Him, the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father

(John 5:22-23). Jesus Christ is both the perfect standard for judgment, in that He lived a perfectly righteous life; and, the perfect Judge, who in His deity knows the very thoughts and intentions of our heart. Every wrong thought we've ever had will be exposed to His gaze!

Thus, since the resurrection is true, judgment is a certainty. And if you say, "All I ask is that God be fair with me," you don't realize what you're saying! If God is fair, you will go straight to hell, because you have violated His righteous standard many times over. If you went into a court of law, even in our lenient justice system, with thousands of counts against you, how do you think you would fare? Never ask God for fairness. Every one of us, because of our sin, stands guilty many times over before God's righteous standard.

What should we do? Should we run from God? Should we try to hide? Should we try harder? No, God has offered a remedy for our guilty condition:

2. If judgment is a certainty, then repentance is a necessity.

"God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent." The word "declaring" should be translated "commanding." It's a word of authority, not just a helpful hint. Repentance may sound like an outmoded term. But if God is commanding "all everywhere" to repent, then we had better be clear on what it means! "All everywhere" is fairly comprehensive. It includes religious people, even decent folks who attend Easter church services. None of us are exempt from the requirement to repent.

The Greek word comes from two words meaning "to change one's mind." But the Bible is clear that repentance is more than intellectual--it means to turn to God from sin. It is a total change of orientation. If I were driving to Phoenix and "repented," it means that I would turn around and drive back toward Flagstaff. All of us, because we're sinners, live for ourselves. We run our lives with the goal of pleasing ourselves. To repent means that we turn from self and sin to God. Instead of thinking that our own efforts will put us in good stead on judgment day (which is the ultimate in pride!), we turn from our works to God's provision for sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who bore the penalty for us. Instead of living for ourselves, we now live to please God.

Repentance is not separate from faith, but is actually a vital part of genuine faith (17:30, “repent”; 17:34, “believed”). Repentance and faith are the two sides of the coin of conversion. In order to turn to God for forgiveness, you must believe that what He says is true: That you have sinned and that Jesus Christ died for your sins. If you truly believe that, your life will be drastically different than before. You can’t hold onto your sin with one hand and reach out for God’s salvation with the other.

In his excellent book, *Faith Works* (Word, pp. 74, 75), Pastor John MacArthur writes,

The Western church has subtly changed the thrust of the gospel. Instead of exhorting sinners to repent, evangelicalism in our society asks the unsaved to “accept Christ.” That makes sinners sovereign and puts Christ at their disposal. In effect it puts Christ on trial and hands the judge’s robes and gavel to the inquirer--precisely opposite of what should be. Ironically, people who ought to be concerned about whether Christ will accept them are being told by Christians that it is the sinner’s prerogative to “accept Christ.” This modified gospel depicts conversion as “a decision for Christ” rather than a life-transforming change of heart involving genuine faith, repentance, surrender, and rebirth unto newness of life.

MacArthur goes on to quote A. W. Tozer, who wrote:

The trouble is that the whole “Accept Christ” attitude is likely to be wrong. It shows Christ [appealing] to us rather than us to Him. It makes Him stand hat-in-hand awaiting our verdict on Him, instead of our kneeling with troubled hearts awaiting His verdict on us. It may even permit us to accept Christ by an impulse of mind or emotions, painlessly, at no loss to our ego and no inconvenience to our usual way of life.

The Bible is clear that there is a false kind of faith, a mere intellectual agreement with the gospel that does not include repentance. Such “faith” does not save.

In the early 1950’s notorious gangster Mickey Cohen attended a meeting where Billy Graham was present. He expressed some interest in the message, so several who were there, including Dr. Graham, talked to him about spiritual matters. But he did not re-

spend until some time later, when another friend urged him to invite Jesus Christ into his life. He professed to do this, but his subsequent life gave no evidence of repentance. When his friend tried to confront him on this, Cohen protested, "You didn't tell me that I would have to give up my work and my friends!"

He had heard that so-and-so was a Christian entertainer, and another was a Christian actress, and another was a Christian politician. He thought he could be a Christian gangster and continue to run with his pagan friends in his pagan way of life! (Adapted from J. Edwin Orr, *Christianity Today* [1/1/82], pp. 24, 25.)

That is *not* saving faith! I must recognize that I am guilty before God's standard of absolute righteousness. Also, I must understand that I can never earn God's forgiveness by my own good works. I can't help God out, since I deserve only His wrath because of my sin. But God, being rich in mercy sent Jesus Christ to die for my sins, thus maintaining His justice, but also enabling Him to extend a free pardon to every sinner who will take it. So I turn to God from my sins to receive that pardon. As a result, I seek to live the rest of my life to please the God who so loved me and gave Himself up for me. That's saving faith!

### Conclusion

Paul saw three different responses to his message that day. *Some began to sneer* (17:32). They didn't believe in the possibility of a resurrection of the dead, which means they didn't believe in God who alone is able to raise the dead. I hope not, but it is possible that some of you are scoffing at what I have said. I urge you not to shrug off this most serious matter! *Others procrastinated*. They said, "We shall hear you again concerning this" (17:32). But so far as we know, they never got that chance. The text says that "Paul went out of their midst." They missed the opportunity to repent and believe. I urge you not to put off repenting and believing, since you may not get another chance!

But *some joined Paul and believed* (17:34). That is what I urge you to do—to join us who believe by believing yourself in the good news that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers a pardon for your sins. Having overlooked your time of ig-

norance, God is now commanding that you should repent. That's what you need to do because the resurrection of Jesus is true!

### Discussion Questions

1. Some say, "I'd be a Christian even if there's no resurrection of the dead, because it's such a good life." The apostle Paul disagreed (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Why?
2. Why is it fatal to think that we're good enough to merit heaven?
3. Why is "inviting Jesus into your heart" or "accepting Jesus as your personal Savior" an inadequate presentation of the gospel?
4. Some argue that to call sinners to repent is to add works to faith. Why is this not so?

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