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WHY BE A CHRISTIAN?

Acts 3:11-26

By

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Easter Sunday Message

Why Be a Christian? Acts 3:11-26

Why be a Christian? Why not be an agnostic or an atheist? Why not live to pursue all of the sexual pleasure that you can get? Why not live to get rich, so that you can enjoy the good life? Why not be a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Muslim? Or, why not join the Baha'i religion, which combines the best from all of the world's religions? Why be a Christian?

I was reared in a Christian home, so I never really thought about any other options until I got to college. As a philosophy major I was hit with all of the different paths in life that you can take. I had to decide whether I would follow the faith of my parents or whether any of these other options were the way to go.

As I thought about it, I realized that the answer to the question, "Why be a Christian?" (as opposed to anything else) centers in the answer to the question that Jesus asked His disciples (Matt. 16:15), "Who do you say that I am?" If Jesus is who He claimed to be and if the apostolic witness to Jesus is credible, then He is the eternal God in human flesh. I *must* trust in Him and submit all of my life to His rightful lordship. *Everything* centers on who Jesus is and what He came to do. And those facts confronted me with who I was, namely, a sinner who stood guilty before the holy God.

Peter's second sermon in Acts deals with these matters. God had just used Peter and John to heal a man who had been lame from birth. A crowd quickly gathered, amazed at what had happened. Peter delivered this sermon, summarized here, that God used to save 2,000 souls (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Since he was talking to "men of Israel" (3:12), Peter used language and concepts that Jewish people could understand. I'll try to explain his thought so that you can see how his message relates to you. To sum it up:

You should be a Christian because Jesus Christ is the only exalted Savior and Lord who will rescue you from God's judgment if you will repent of your sins.

You must understand who Jesus is as the only exalted Savior and Lord. You also need to understand why He came to this earth, namely, to rescue sinners from God's judgment. And, you must understand what you must do to escape from God's judgment, namely, repent of your sins.

1. Jesus Christ is the only exalted Savior and Lord.

Peter's sermon is full of the Lord Jesus Christ. Any reflection on his message confronts us with the crucial question, *Who is Jesus Christ?* Is He a mere man who had some good moral teachings? If so, I'm free to adopt whatever of His teachings I find helpful and ignore the rest. But if He is the only Savior and Lord, prophesied of in the Old Testament, crucified in accordance with God's plan, but risen from the dead as He predicted, then He is also the coming Judge of the whole earth. *This* risen Christ imposes some inescapable claims on every life. You can ignore Him at your own peril, or follow Him as Savior and Lord. But *everything* hinges on Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"

A. If Jesus is the only exalted Savior, then He alone should be exalted.

Peter begins his sermon (3:12) by deflecting the glory for the miracle away from John and him, as if they had either the power or piety to make a lame man walk. Rather, Peter says (vv. 13, 16), "It was God who glorified the name of His servant Jesus by healing this man." And in the same way, only God can save anyone from sin and judgment through Jesus Christ. I can't save anyone by my preaching or my powers of persuasion. You can't save yourself by your own determination or good works. Only God can save you and He does it through His risen, exalted servant, Jesus Christ. That way, He gets all the glory.

B. Jesus Christ is the only exalted Savior and Lord, who died for sinners, was raised from the dead, and is coming again to judge the world.

First, we'll consider who Jesus is and then what He came to do.

(1) Who is Jesus Christ? He is the only exalted Savior and Lord.

Peter uses numerous titles that apply to Jesus, but they are all summed up in the phrase, *"the name of Jesus"* (3:16): "And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; ..." Peter is referring to what happened as recorded in verse 6, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" Jesus' name stands for everything that He is. To the Jews, "the Name" was a way of referring to God. They would not even pronounce His name, "Yahweh." Peter here exalts the name of Jesus.

Jesus comes from the Hebrew name, Joshua, which means, "Yahweh saves." The angel told Joseph to name Mary's son Jesus, because "He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). *Jesus* also points to our Lord's humanity, since he was given that name at His birth, having been miraculously conceived in Mary through the Holy Spirit (see Luke 1:30-37).

Peter also refers to Jesus as the *Servant* of "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (3:13). The word "servant" is used in the Greek version of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, where the prophet predicts that the coming Servant would be "pierced through for our transgressions" and that the Lord would cause "the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (53:5-6). As the Lord's Servant, Jesus did not come to do His own will, but rather to submit fully to God's will, especially to offer Himself for our sins.

Peter also calls Jesus *"the Holy and Righteous One"* (3:14). Jesus was without any sin. He fulfilled what the Jewish sacrifices typified. In 1 Peter 1:19, Peter refers to Jesus as the "lamb unblemished and spotless," who shed His blood to redeem us from our sins. Because Jesus was sinless, He could offer Himself as the substitute for sinners, without needing to make atonement for His own sins. "Righteous One" focuses on the fact that Jesus always obeyed God (Isa. 53:9; John 8:29, 46).

Peter also refers to Jesus as *"the Prince of life"* (Acts 3:15). The word "prince" means leader, author, or originator (see Heb. 2:10; 12:2). As the Prince or Author of life, Jesus originates life, both physically and spiritually. Just prior to raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus told Martha (John 11:25-26), "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die." Then He point-

edly asked Martha the question each of us must answer, “Do you believe this?”

Peter refers to Jesus as God’s *Christ*, appointed for you (Acts 3:18, 20). “Christ” and “Messiah” both mean “Anointed One.” Jesus was not a self-appointed Christ. God appointed Him as His Anointed One. As such, He fulfills the many Old Testament Messianic prophecies (e.g., Psalms 2, 16, 22, 110).

Peter also shows (3:22) that Jesus is the *prophet* whom Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15 (see John 1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40). Not only that, Jesus was the one of whom all the prophets, from Samuel onward, had spoken (Acts 3:24). While Samuel himself made no recorded prophecy about the Messiah, he anointed David as king and spoke of the establishment of his kingdom through his descendent, which was fulfilled in Jesus (1 Sam. 13:14; 15:28; 28:17; 2 Sam. 7:12-16).

Furthermore, Jesus is *the seed of Abraham* through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Acts 3:25). Peter concludes (3:26) by stating again that Jesus is God’s *Servant*, whom He raised up (in the sense of 3:22, “appointed”) and sent to bless them by turning them from their wicked ways. Thus Peter, speaking to his Jewish audience, has shown Jesus to fulfill God’s promises to Abraham, Moses, and David.

The point is, Jesus Christ is unique in all of history. He fulfilled over 300 Old Testament prophecies, written hundreds of years in advance. As I mentioned in a recent message, the statistical odds of anyone fulfilling just eight of these prophecies is astronomical. It would be like covering the state of Texas two-feet deep in silver dollars, marking one, and having a blindfolded man pick that one (Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks* [Moody Press], pp. 99-112). And that’s just eight prophecies. If you take all 300, the odds defy comprehension. If Jesus is the exalted, risen Lord and Savior who is coming again to judge the earth, then you cannot ignore Him!

(2) What did Jesus do? He died for sinners, was raised from the dead, and is coming again.

Jesus died on the cross. After showing who Jesus is—God’s Servant, the Holy and Righteous One, the Prince of Life, the Christ, the Prophet, and the seed of Abraham—Peter’s audience should

have realized that while they killed Jesus, at the same time He laid down His life willingly. They were responsible for their sin of putting Jesus to death, and yet, at the same time, it had been announced beforehand by God's prophets "that His Christ would suffer" and now God had fulfilled His word (3:18). As Isaiah 53 shows, God's servant would bear the sins of His people. The apostles themselves did not understand this clearly until after the resurrection, when Jesus explained to them that the Christ had to suffer these things before He entered into His glory (Luke 24:26, 46).

The cross of Christ is the main thing that you must consider with reference to the question, "Why be a Christian?" The Bible clearly states, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Since we all have sinned, we all deserve God's punishment. The death spoken of is not only physical death, but also what the Bible calls "the second death," which it describes as eternity in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). On the cross, Jesus bore that awful penalty for all who will repent of their sins and trust in Him.

The cross humbles our pride, because it robs us of the glory of being our own savior. It also humbles us by showing that we aren't pretty good people who just need a little boost from God to get into heaven. If we were, then Christ died needlessly. We are sinners, alienated from God and unable to do anything to save ourselves. If Christ had not died for us, we would be eternally lost.

Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. Neither death nor all the powers of hell could hold down "the Prince of life" (3:15)! Peter testifies that God raised Him from the dead, "a fact to which we are witnesses" (3:15). If Jesus' body had still been in the tomb or if the Jewish leaders knew the whereabouts of Jesus' body, Peter and the other apostles would have been laughed out of town for making such a claim. The fact that Peter could boldly declare this and 2,000 people that day believed it proves that the resurrection was a historic event, not an imaginary tale. Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. This is the central fact of Christianity, without which everything else falls to the ground (1 Cor. 15:12-19).

Jesus is coming again to fulfill God's promises to Israel and to judge all who reject Him. If Peter's audience wondered, "If He is raised, where is He?" Peter explains (3:19-21), "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing

may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.”

Jesus is now in heaven, but He will return and fulfill God's promises to Israel. But, if the Jews wanted Messiah's kingdom to come, they needed to accept Jesus as the Messiah. You can't have the kingdom without accepting the King! And if they doubted that Jesus is the predicted Messiah, then read the prophets! As I said, Jesus fulfilled the many Old Testament prophecies about Messiah as no one else could do.

The “times of refreshing” have both an immediate and a long range fulfillment for those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Immediately, He floods your life with all the blessings of salvation. Your sins are forgiven. You receive new life. You enter into a relationship with the living God. As His child, you are invited into His presence to receive grace to help in all your needs. And, long range, you have the promise of a glorious eternity with Christ in a new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13)!

But there is also a sober note of warning. When Jesus comes, “every soul that does not heed” [obey] Him “shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (3:23). He will come again as the Savior of those who believe in Him, but as the fearful Judge of those who disobey Him. You're either on one side or the other.

Thus Peter shows us who Jesus is: the exalted Savior and Lord; and what Jesus did: He died on the cross for sinners, was raised from the dead, and is coming again, either for salvation for those who obey Him or judgment for those who do not. But we need to explore this theme of sin and judgment a bit deeper:

2. Jesus came to rescue sinners from the penalty of their sin before they face God in judgment.

Peter is not diplomatic! He hits his audience squarely with the terrible sin that they had committed in crucifying Jesus. At the outset (3:13), he nails them for disowning Jesus when Pilate would have released Him. The word “disowned” means “to deny.” He repeats it in verse 14, where the word “you” is emphatic (3:14-15):

"You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead." What a horrible thing, to kill God's sinless servant and instead ask that a murderer be freed! Peter is showing how they were opposed to God Himself. And he is showing how stupid it is to oppose God. You can kill His servant, but God has the power to raise Him from the dead. The point is, you can't oppose God and win!

While the Jews in Jesus' day literally killed their Messiah, we're all guilty of the same crime. Charles Spurgeon pointed out, "Every sin in the essence of it is a killing of God" (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 14:198). Our sin put Jesus on the cross. If you do not repent of your sin and trust in Jesus as your Savior, that sin will condemn you at the final judgment.

Please understand: Jesus didn't come and die on the cross to help you reach your full potential or to feel better about yourself or to have a happy family. He didn't have to die to do any of that. He died to save you from the penalty of your sin by offering Himself as your substitute.

Ray Comfort illustrates this by picturing a guy on an airplane. The stewardess comes by and asks him if he would like to put on a parachute. She assures him that it will really make his flight more comfortable. He's skeptical, but finally he puts on the parachute. But it doesn't make his life more comfortable. He can't lean back in his seat. It is heavy and the straps chafe his shoulders. It's giving him a headache. The other passengers are laughing at him. Finally, in disgust he takes it off and throws it away.

But what would change this picture? The pilot comes on the intercom and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've lost power in all our engines. You're all going to have to jump out of the plane at 10,000 feet. The stewardess is coming around with parachutes." The parachute is not to make your flight more comfortable, but to enable you to make the jump without dying.

Christ did not die on the cross to make your life more comfortable. Following Him may make your life more difficult! But He died on the cross so that you can survive the jump. Trusting in His shed blood as the payment for your sin means that you are acquit-

ted of your guilt before God's holy throne of justice. Without Christ, you'll have to make the jump without the parachute!

Perhaps you're wondering what Peter means (v. 17) when he tells his audience that he knows that they and their rulers acted in ignorance. It's a difficult verse, in that the Jewish leaders, at least, seemed to know full well what they were doing. Peter is not saying that their ignorance absolved them of guilt, because he goes on to exhort them to turn from their sins before they faced God's judgment. Rather, he seems to be reflecting the Hebrew concept of unintentional sins of ignorance as opposed to sins of willful defiance (Num. 15:22-31; Lev. 4:2; 5:18; 22:14). For sins of ignorance, an offering was available to remove guilt (Heb. 9:7). But to turn defiantly away from the light that you received upped your guilt and left you without hope.

This means that unless you turn from your sins and trust in Jesus Christ today, you made a huge mistake by coming to church on Easter Sunday! You have exposed yourself to more of God's light than you had before. This leaves you with more guilt on judgment day than if you had never heard these things! That's bad news! But, I have some good news to leave with you:

3. Jesus will rescue you from God's judgment if you will repent of your sins.

After Peter's indictment of his audience, you would expect him to say, "God is going to judge you for crucifying Jesus," and walk off and leave them. That's what they deserved. But rather, he exhorts them (3:19), "Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away." If they would repent, God would send Jesus to bring times of refreshing and to restore all things (3:19-21), a reference to the millennial kingdom. There will be a major revival among the Jews just before the return of Christ (Zech. 12:10; 14:9; Matt. 23:39; Rom. 11:26). Peter tells them that God sent His Servant Jesus "to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways" (3:26). Sin never results in blessing. Turning from sin to Christ opens the door to true and lasting blessing.

If God is so gracious as to offer forgiveness and His kingdom blessings to those who crucified His Son, then surely He offers grace to *every* sinner who will repent. The apostle Paul was the chief

of sinners, but he says that he found mercy, so that in him as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1 Tim. 1:15-16). God sent His Servant Jesus to bless *you*, by turning *you* from your wicked ways!

What is repentance? It is a change of mind that results in a change of one's entire life. It means to turn to God from your sin. Spurgeon (*ibid.*, p. 195) said, "Repentance is a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it. It is, in fact, a change of mind of a very deep and practical character, which makes the man love what once he hated, and hate what once he loved."

Have you repented of your sins? Have you fled to the risen Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope of being rescued from God's judgment? Has He wiped away your sins and blessed you by turning you from your wicked ways?

Conclusion

So why be a Christian? It all comes back to who Jesus is and what He did when He came to this earth. If Jesus is the exalted Savior and Lord, who was crucified for our sins, raised from the dead by God's power, and coming again to judge the earth, then you need to repent of your sins ASAP!

Discussion Questions

1. Why does everything about Christianity rest on who Jesus is? How can we know that the apostolic witness to Jesus is true?
2. Why must the gospel center on the conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8), rather than on how Jesus can make you happy?
3. Is it okay to appeal to felt needs (other than forgiveness) in presenting the gospel? Cite biblical examples.
4. Is repentance a one-time action at the beginning of the Christian life, or an ongoing matter? How does it differ from faith?

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