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YOUR RESPONSE TO THE RESURRECTION

Acts 25:23-26:32

By

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Acts Lesson 67

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Years ago, *Reader's Digest* [11/82] carried the story of one of the nation's leading chest surgeons, Dr. Paul Adkins, who looked at his own chest X-ray and realized that he was looking at his own obituary. He was dead four and a half months later, at age 55, from lung cancer, the disease that he had attempted to treat in hundreds of other patients. The sad, ironic fact was that Dr. Adkins himself had smoked up to a pack and a half of cigarettes daily for 40 years. His mother had smoked and lived to an old age, and so Dr. Adkins had foolishly concluded that he could do the same. Even after he realized that he had lung cancer he continued to smoke, against the strong warnings of his colleagues.

If anyone knew the dangers of smoking, Dr. Adkins did, but he did not apply that knowledge to himself. Knowledge is of no use if we do not apply it. The same is true spiritually. We can know the truth, but if we do not apply it personally, it does us no good.

I'm concerned because I read that anywhere between one-third to one-half of Americans claim to be born again Christians, and yet there is no appreciable difference in how they live. There is no difference between professing Christians and the American culture regarding how much or what TV shows we watch; our rate of sexual immorality; or our divorce rate.

The current issue of *World* (3/30/02) has a cover story on evangelical pastors who become sexually involved with women whom they are counseling. They cite a 1984 survey that one out of five theologically conservative pastors admits to sexual impropriety! I have read other surveys that put the number at one out of eight, which is still shocking! The most disturbing example they report is about a pastor who remains in his pulpit, who is scheduled to speak at a major Campus Crusade conference this summer, but who has never repented of serious sexual sins. Truly there are many who will say to Jesus on judgment day, "Lord, Lord," only to hear Him reply, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:21-23)!

Our text gives us the longest of Paul's defenses in the Book of Acts. This one is before Festus, Agrippa, and his sister/lover, Bernice, along with many important dignitaries from the Roman capital, Caesarea. It is the third time that Luke repeats Paul's testimony of his conversion. Paul especially focuses on the commission that the risen Lord Jesus gave to him, to go to the Gentiles so that they might repent and turn to God (26:18, 20). As in all the apostolic witness in Acts, Paul's testimony rests on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His message to us is:

Our response to the fact of Jesus' resurrection
should be repentance.

In other words, to say, "I believe in the risen Savior," but to go on living in the same way as this wicked world lives, does no more good than for a chest surgeon to say, "I believe that smoking causes lung cancer," but to go on smoking his pack a day. If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, our lives will show it. Repentance is not optional for the believer. Those who separate God's grace in salvation from repentance pervert the gospel (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Acts, 2:383). Like the false prophets of old, they heal the brokenness of people superficially and give false assurance by saying, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer. 8:11).

Paul's defense here makes two main points: (1) The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact; (2) Repentance is the only rational response to this great fact.

1. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fact of history.

Paul is speaking here before a skeptical audience, and so he presents his case inductively. He does not state up front, "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." He would have been hooted out of the room. Even when he finally states this great truth, Festus interrupts to say that he's out of his mind (26:24). So Paul begins with the possibility of resurrection in general. Then he describes his own encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, and the changes that took place in his life as a result. Then he asserts that his message is completely in line with the Jewish Scriptures, of which Agrippa had some knowledge. Finally he comes to his point, that Jesus died and was raised from the dead. He gives four proofs of the resurrection:

A. The resurrection is possible because of God.

Paul begins by telling of his early life in Judaism and identifying himself with the hope that God had promised the Jews, namely, the coming of Messiah and His kingdom. That promise would have been worthless to the Jews that had died in past generations if there were no resurrection of the dead. Yet it was for this Jewish hope that Paul's Jewish kinsmen were accusing him. Thus he interjects, "Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?" (26:8).

In other words, if you believe in the God of the Bible, you must necessarily believe that He has the power to raise the dead. And, as Paul will go on to assert, the fact that God raised up Jesus proves that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. Paul's logic here is solid: If you believe in the God who created all things and who spoke life into existence, you must also admit that God has the inherent power to raise the dead.

B. The resurrection is proved by eyewitness testimony.

Paul goes on to recount again his own dramatic encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road (26:12-15). As I mentioned last week, critics might say that Paul only saw a vision or hallucination, not the actual risen Lord Jesus. If Paul had been the only one to make such a claim, perhaps we would have to concede the point, or at least not build our case on it. But in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, Paul states that the risen Lord appeared to Peter and the other apostles, as well as to over 500 followers at one time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote. Floyd Hamilton states (cited in *Teacher's Manual for the Ten Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity* [Campus Crusade for Christ, 1965], p. 104, italics his),

Now it is perfectly possible for one man to have an hallucination, and two men might have the same hallucination by a singular coincidence, but that eleven men of intelligence, whose characters and writings indicate their sanity in other respects, or that five hundred men in a body should have the *same* hallucination and at the *same* time, stretches the law of probability to the breaking point!

Or, as J. N. D. Anderson wrote ("The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Christianity Today* [3/29/68], pp. 5, 6),

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 we 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.

Someone may be thinking, "That's great for those who saw the risen Christ. But I've never seen Him. How do you expect me to believe?"

I expect you to believe because there is reasonable evidence to believe. We all believe in things we cannot see and in people we do not know. You trusted that the people who packaged the cereal you ate for breakfast did not poison it. You trusted that the mechanic who fixed your brakes did a good job. You trust the teller at the bank to deposit your money in your account and not steal it. If you accept the witness of men, the witness of God concerning His Son is greater (1 John 5:9). He will rightly hold us accountable if we reject the eyewitness testimony that He has given us regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

C. The resurrection is proved by the changed lives of the witnesses.

Paul had been devoted to destroying Christians. He says that he was "furiously enraged" at them (26:11). And yet here he is, a prisoner for the cause of Christ, having endured numerous hardships because of his faith in Christ, and yet there is not a trace of bitterness or hatred in him toward his enemies. How did this man who had been driven by hate change into a man driven by the love of Christ? The only explanation is that he had seen the risen Savior. The same is true of the transformation in all of the apostles.

D. The resurrection is supported by the fulfillment of prophecy.

Paul affirms that he is saying nothing except that which Moses and the Prophets had said would take place, “that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23). Probably Paul went into more detail here, quoting from Isaiah 53, Psalm 16, and Psalm 22, all of which predicted Messiah’s death and resurrection centuries before these things took place.

Thus Paul’s point is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a historical event. Such a miracle is possible because God exists. It is proved by eyewitness testimony and by the changed lives of the witnesses. It is supported by the Hebrew Scriptures.

But, so what? What difference should this fact make?

2. Repentance is the proper response to the resurrection.

Paul shows this both by his own example and by his direct preaching. When Paul believed in Jesus Christ, he did a 180-degree turnaround. From then on he preached that all men must repent (26:20). Repentance is a turning of the whole person away from sin and toward God. It involves a change of mind, but it is more than merely a change of mind. It involves a change of the mind, the will, and the emotions, resulting in a change of behavior. Repentance is not separate from saving faith, but is rather the flip side of faith. If you truly believe that Jesus Christ is the risen Savior, you cannot remain the same. You will turn from your sins to God. Note four things about repentance implied in Paul’s words here:

A. Repentance involves a change of understanding: from darkness to light.

God sent Paul “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light” (26:18). Apart from Christ, all people, no matter how brilliant their minds, are “darkened in their understanding” (Eph. 4:18). The “god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). They cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God, which are spiritually appraised (1 Cor. 2:14).

People in this naturally fallen condition cannot grasp the awesome holiness of God. If you had asked Paul before his conversion whether he believed that God is holy, I'm sure that he would have answered, "Of course!" He knew that fact intellectually. But only when the light brighter than the sun shone from heaven did Paul realize that God was far more holy than he had ever imagined. Previously, Paul thought that his own good deeds as a Pharisee would qualify him for dwelling in God's presence in heaven. But the instant the light of God's holiness struck him to the ground, Paul, like Isaiah, was undone. He realized that his own holiness was like filthy rags in the sight of God.

At that same instant, Paul saw that he was far more sinful than he had ever imagined. Again, if you had asked Paul before his conversion if he were a sinner, he would have replied, "Of course, all men are sinners." He probably would have thought, "I'm glad that I'm not like Gentile sinners! I tithe, I pray, I fast" (see Luke 18:10-12). But when the light from heaven blinded him, Paul instantly realized that he could never qualify for heaven by his own good deeds. Further, he realized that he needed atonement for his many sins, and that all of his supposed good deeds could never pay for his many evil deeds.

Years after his conversion, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). He did not say, I *was* chief, but I *am* chief! As C. S. Lewis pointed out, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less" (cited by Nathan Hatch, *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], p. 14). Thus repentance is not just a one-time experience at the moment of conversion. It is the ongoing experience of every believer who walks in God's holy light.

If sin and Satan blind people so that they cannot see the light of God's truth regarding His holiness and their own sin, how can they change? The biblical answer is, only God can change them. As Paul said, "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). God brings this change through the preaching of the gospel. Thus

the risen Lord tells Paul that he will open their eyes (26:18), although obviously, only God's power through Paul's preaching of the gospel can do that.

God not only opens the sinner's eyes to the holiness of God and to the depths of the sinner's depravity, but also to the abundance of God's grace in Christ, who bore the penalty that sinners deserve. Thus even Paul, the chief of sinners, found mercy at the cross. That same mercy is available to all who will repent.

B. Repentance involves a change of masters: from Satan to God.

Everyone by nature is born into this world as a captive to Satan's evil domain of darkness (Col. 1:13). As Charles Wesley put it, "Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night" ("Amazing Love"). We all were held captive by Satan to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26). Both Jesus and Paul describe our condition as being slaves of sin (John 8:34-35; Rom. 6:17, 20).

How can anyone break free from so strong a master? Jesus said, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Paul says that God "rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). It is God alone who can free us from slavery to sin and make us slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:17-23). Or, as Wesley put it, "Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."

This means that if you have not experienced a definite change of masters, from sin and Satan to holiness and God, you had better examine yourself to see whether you have truly repented of your sins. Repentance means turning from Satan's dominion to God.

C. Repentance involves a change of relationship: from condemnation to forgiveness and acceptance as heirs.

Paul continues, "that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me" (26:18). Before repentance, we were under God's just condemnation because of our sins (John 3:18, 36). But the instant that we repent and believe in Christ, God sets us apart ("sanctified")

and grants us forgiveness of sins and all of the riches that are in Christ. At that moment, we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Rather than being afraid of God because of our sins, now we can come boldly into His presence through Christ's blood to receive grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:16; 9:22-28). Thus if you have turned from your sins and trusted in Christ, you now enjoy God's forgiveness and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:3-8).

Thus repentance involves a change of understanding, from darkness to light; a change of masters, from Satan to God; a change of relationship, from condemnation to forgiveness and acceptance as heirs. Finally,

D. Repentance involves a change of behavior: from sin to deeds appropriate to repentance.

In verse 20, Paul tells of his obedience to this heavenly vision. He kept declaring both to Jews and Gentiles, "that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance." Whether you have been a religious person (as Paul and the Jews were) or a raw pagan (as the Gentiles were), the message is the same: Repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

As G. H. Lang put it, "None more firmly than Paul rejected works, before or after conversion, as a ground of salvation; none more firmly demanded good works as a consequence of salvation" (*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans], p. 493). Biblical repentance is not just a change of mind or an intellectual decision. It is a turning of the whole person from sin to God, resulting in a life of obedience to God from the heart (Rom. 6:17).

Paul personally addresses Agrippa (26:27) with the question, "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets?" Before Agrippa can respond, Paul answers his own question, "I know that you do." Yes, Agrippa believed the prophets in an intellectual sort of way, just as many Americans "believe in Jesus." But it made no difference in the way he lived. But Paul was not just preaching for intellectual assent. He was preaching for repentance.

So am I! Repentance means that you believe in the risen Savior with such conviction that it turns around the way you live. Instead of living in darkness, you now live in the light of God's holy presence and His Word. Instead of living under Satan's domain, you now live under the Lordship of Jesus. Instead of living for yourself and sinful pleasure, you now live to please Jesus Christ.

Now Paul had Agrippa in a corner. If he denied his belief in the Prophets, he would lose face with the Jews. If he agreed with Paul, he could see that the next question would be, "Why don't you believe in Jesus Christ as the risen Savior?" He wasn't ready to go there! So he skated out of this embarrassing dilemma with a mildly sarcastic humorous dodge, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28). The NIV may be correct in making it a question, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" And so to save face in front of this pompous crowd, Agrippa threw away his opportunity to receive God's forgiveness and gift of eternal life!

Conclusion

Probably almost everyone here believes that seat belts save lives. But that belief does not do you any good in a crash unless you had actually fastened your seat belt. Those who buckle up are those who truly believe that seat belts save lives. How would you like your obituary to read, "He believed in seat belts, but he was not wearing one at the time of the crash"? Your belief is worthless if you don't personally apply it.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? Good for you! You do well so to believe, because it is true! But if that belief has not led to a life of repentance from sin, it won't do you any good on the Day of Judgment. Your response to the fact of Jesus' resurrection should be repentance.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to assert the factual basis of the Christian faith? In other words, if believing in Christianity gives us a happy life, what difference does it make whether it's true?
2. Some evangelicals argue that to require repentance for salvation is to add works to faith alone. Why is this not valid?
3. If God must grant repentance (Acts 11:18), is it a vain exercise to call people to repent? Why/why not?
4. Can true Christians be enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:17, 22)? Cite biblical evidence to support your answer.

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