

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Resurrection

It was the year 1825. John Brown was in deep trouble. He had a wife and ten children - though they were not the source of his trouble, I hasten to add! He was the village baker. His bread and his pies were legendary. Everybody loved him. But six months ago, as a result of some foolish gambling, he found himself heavily in debt. His business had been sold, but that had not been enough to pay his debts. So John, his wife and family had been hauled off to Marshalsea prison, the debtors' prison. That was the law in those days. Though how the law expected him to clear the debt while still in prison was beyond him! The words of Mr. Bumble, in Charles Dickens' *"Oliver Twist"* seemed only too sadly true: "The law is an ass - an idiot". They had been here for six months and looked like being here for a lifetime! But then, unexpectedly, a friend, who had only recently returned to the country from abroad, heard of John's distress and paid the debt. John and his family were free. Everybody was so glad to see him again. There he was, back in his own village, walking the streets as large as life. There could be only one conclusion - the debt had been paid! Just as this was true for John Brown so, on this Easter Sunday, we remember that it is true in a far greater way in the resurrection of Christ.

The significance of His resurrection

Let us look first, then, at the significance of His resurrection. Last Sunday, we were thinking about the death of Jesus. That death was absolutely essential if that awful debt of our sin was to be dealt with. On the cross, as the apostle Peter reminds us, the Lord Jesus "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). As the children's hymn puts it,

*"He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by His precious blood."*

The good news of the Christian message is that Jesus did not stay dead! On that first Easter Sunday, He rose triumphantly from the dead! The message of His resurrection is absolutely crucial to Christianity. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! ... We are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:17 and 19). After this broadcast, take time to read through the whole of this tremendously important and thrilling chapter which deals at length with the resurrection of Jesus.

How can we know that the awful debt of our sin has been dealt with? On the cross Jesus had cried in triumph, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Now, in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, God gives His clear answer to all the world that that debt has been paid. "Once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). There can be no doubt whatever that the repentant sinner, trusting in the work of the Lord Jesus at Calvary for the forgiveness of his sins, has peace with God. Paul triumphantly declares, "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:33 and 34).

We cannot over-emphasise the fundamental importance of the resurrection as an essential part of the Christian message. Jesus Himself saw it as part of His redemptive mission. Mark tells us how He forewarned His disciples just before His death: "Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and to the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again" (10:32-34). The resurrection was a vital part of the preaching of the apostles after Jesus' death. Listen to Peter's stirring words as he challenged the Jews: "But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses" (Acts 3:14-15). Paul summarised the Christian Gospel as follows: "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The preaching of the resurrection was important in the 1st century. It is just as important in this 20th century, and in the 21st century, if the Lord leaves His Church here.

The certainty of His resurrection

Let us look now at: The certainty of His resurrection. Because the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is such a vital part of the Christian Gospel, it is not surprising that Satan has done, and is still doing, his best to discredit it. Various alternative explanations have been offered in its place. We ought to examine these briefly, and see them for what they are - lies of Satan.

It is argued that Jesus did not really die. He was only in a swoon when His body was laid in the tomb. In the cool of that tomb, He revived and came out. But think of what He endured from the moment of His arrest on that Thursday evening: His buffeting in Pilate's judgement hall, His scourging, the crown of thorns, His hanging on the cross for some six to nine hours, the opinion of His seasoned executioners, "they ... saw that He was already dead" (John 19:33). But even if they had made a mistake, and He wasn't really dead, is it possible that a man in His condition could revive to such an extent that He was able to roll away the stone from the tomb? Remember that the chief priests had sealed the tomb and had set the temple guards to watch it (Matthew 27:56). Remember also that the women who went to the tomb early on that Easter morning, intending to anoint the dead body of Jesus, wondered who would "roll away the stone from the door of the tomb" (Mark 16:3). They knew that they would not have sufficient strength.

Alternatively, it is suggested that Jesus was really dead but His disciples came and stole the body. But where would they hide it in a city where the enemies of Jesus would have been desperate to produce the body and so destroy for ever the lie, as they believed it to be, that He was risen from the dead? And would those same disciples, knowing that it was a lie, have been ready to die for it, as several of them did later. It would have been far easier for them to have confessed their deed and saved their skins!

Then we are left with the problem of explaining how a bunch of fearful, dispirited disciples were so transformed. Peter had denied his Lord and gone out weeping bitterly. The other disciples had run away, terrified for their lives, when the guards came to arrest Jesus. On the first Easter Day, those disciples were hiding away in a locked room (John 20:19). Yet not long after, they all went out fearlessly proclaiming the fact of His resurrection, with little thought for the consequences to themselves from their enemies.

It is sometimes argued that the disciples underwent some kind of collective hallucination and only thought that He was risen from the dead. But if you listen to any one suffering from an hallucination, it fairly soon becomes clear that their words are not to be believed. Yet the preaching of these disciples was such that, on one day alone, more than three thousand believed the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and were added to the Church (Acts 2:41).

We are left, then, with the conclusion that the only reasonable explanation of all these events is that the Lord Jesus really did rise from the dead. This momentous conclusion the Christian gladly accepts, not forced to it through logic, but by faith. He is risen!

The consequences of His resurrection

Let us now look at what the resurrection of Jesus means for the Christian, what we might call the consequences of His resurrection.

Firstly, as we have already touched on, in the resurrection God declares plainly His total acceptance of the work of His Son as our sin-bearer. As Peter could so boldly declare to the Jews on the day of Pentecost, "Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (Acts 2:23 and 24). He is risen! The debt of our sin has been paid, even more certainly than John Brown's debt was paid! The simplest believer, trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins, can enjoy absolute security and total peace.

Secondly, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are brought into a new relationship with God. You can read the wonderful story of the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene in John 20. She had come to the garden tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. To her utter distress, the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Someone must have stolen the body, she thought. When Jesus stood before her, in her distress she failed to recognise Him, believing Him to be the gardener. But then He spoke her name, "Mary". Immediately she recognised Him! He was alive! Jesus entrusted to Mary this very special message: "Go to My brethren and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (verse 17).

Here is a totally new relationship. He had previously called them "My disciples" and then "My friends" (John 15:7 and 14). But here, for the first time, "My brethren". What? These disciples who, a few days earlier, had been arguing who should be the greatest when He was amongst them as Servant? These disciples who had abandoned Him in

Gethsemane when He so desperately needed them? Could these be His brethren? Yes, because this relationship in no way depends on what they were, but rather on the work He did at Calvary's cross. So we, too, by faith come into that same relationship because of that same work.

Hebrews 2:11 reminds us: "He is not ashamed to call them brethren". Would anyone else acknowledge us in such a way? Some of us readily confess that we are a poor lot; so often we let Him down; so often we fail to serve Him as we should. Yet in marvellous grace, because of the work which He did at Calvary, He is not ashamed!

The fact that the Lord Jesus chooses to call us His brethren does not give us the right to address Him as our Brother, or even our Elder Brother. To the Christian, Jesus is Lord. He is the Head of His body, the Church. We should always address Him with reverence. But the Lord goes on: "My Father and your Father".

Throughout the Old Testament, the Jews had known God only as Jehovah. This was His covenant relationship with Israel. But here is a wonderful, new family relationship. Little wonder that John can exclaim, "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1). That relationship we can enjoy day by day in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul could write to the Galatians, "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts crying out, "Abba, Father!" (4:6). Read the Gospels and see how the Lord Jesus so often spoke to His Father and know that you can go through each day in that same relationship! And all this because of His death and resurrection.

Then, thirdly, His resurrection is the sure promise of our being raised to be with Him. In 1 Corinthians 15, that wonderful resurrection chapter to which we have already referred, Paul writes, "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (verses 20-23).

In the Old Testament, the Jew had to bring an offering to God of the firstfruits of his harvest. So a sheaf of the first ripe barley, or wheat, would be brought from the field and offered to God. Two important ideas lay behind this offering. Firstly, God would have the prior claim to the harvest, but there would be more to come. Secondly, what was to come would be of exactly the same kind. These same two ideas lie behind the statement, "Christ the firstfruits". His death and resurrection is only the beginning of a vast harvest of the redeemed who will be in heaven with Him because of His work at Calvary. Jesus could say to Andrew and Philip, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24). Just as in resurrection the Lord Jesus was given a new, glorified body, so the Christian looks forward to His coming for "we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). So let us on this Easter Day gladly take up the message of the angel on that first Easter Day, "He is risen". The children's chorus puts it best:

*He lives! He lives!
Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me,
And He talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives! He lives,
Salvation to impart.
You ask me how I know He lives,
He lives within my heart.*

The power of His resurrection

Finally, we must say something about the power of His resurrection. The power of Jesus' resurrection is a vital resource for Christian living today. Paul longed to "know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). Paul did not only look forward to experiencing that power at Jesus' coming when Paul's body, alive or dead, would be raised to be with the Lord Jesus. He recognised that he needed to know that power to live for Jesus now. Only then would he find strength to face the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Paul prayed for the Christians at Ephesus that they might "know ... what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead" (Ephesians 1:18-20). The mighty power of Christ's resurrection was to be seen on display in the lives of the Christians in Ephesus! Because of the power of Jesus' resurrection, the Christian can be delivered from every fear, including that of death. The Christian need not fear what man may do unto him.

Today, we speak of horse power, manpower, steam power, electric power, and nuclear power. But resurrection power is greater than all these! In the grace of God, it is available to us today! Gloria and William Gaither catch the importance of the resurrection of Jesus in their hymn:

*God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus;
He came to love, heal and forgive;
He lived and died to buy my pardon,
An empty grave is there to prove my Saviour lives.*

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow;
Because He lives all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living just because He lives.*

And now a prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank You for dying for us. We rejoice today in the fact that You are alive for evermore. Thank You for all which that means to us. Help us to know the power of Your resurrection in our lives today. Amen.

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