

Jesus is our Risen Saviour

Do you ever find it odd that Christians celebrate the fact that Jesus died on a cross? Why celebrate the fact that he was brutally beaten, humiliated, and executed, especially if you claim to be a follower of his? Why not simply focus on his teachings, or the way he lived his life? It would seem to make more sense, wouldn't it? And yet, Christians everywhere celebrate his death on a regular basis. Just think of Good Friday. Every time Christians take communion, it's to remember that Christ broke his body and shed his blood on the cross. Even the first Christians who lived when Jesus lived took communion after his death (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:19-34). If it sounds strange now, it seems even stranger to have people celebrate a friend's death so soon after witnessing it. I think the big question is why? On the surface, this makes about as much sense as admirers of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr. celebrating their assassinations.

So what's the purpose? The reason is simple: The story didn't end with his death. If it did, Christianity would have died along with Christ 2000 years ago. Even Christ's own disciples, his closest followers were crushed when they witnessed his death on the cross. They scattered and abandoned him. One even denied being his disciple to avoid persecution. And yet, three days later everything changed. These fearful and scattered men suddenly became filled with a renewed purpose to proclaim the name of Jesus regardless of the consequences. So what changed? They saw Jesus alive. They ate with him and even touched the wounds on his hands. They were convinced he conquered death.

Now the obvious question arises in the minds of any skeptic: Why should I believe? The bottom line is this, the very foundation of Christianity is based on Jesus living a sinless life, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead. If any of these things are proven false, then it proves Christianity is a sham and that our faith is futile. However, if proven true, then we'd better take what Jesus said very seriously because he told us that we as human beings are on the path to destruction unless we recognize our sin and trust in him alone. Any other person who would make a statement like that should be viewed as a lunatic, but he backed up what he said by what he did and accomplished. Now it's obviously up to all of you individually to weigh the evidence and decide what the truth is, but this is an issue where your life and eternity are on the line. You owe yourself to at least take the time to explore the evidence with an open mind and make sure you know the facts.

According to scholars, in about 52-55 AD, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to one of the early churches: The church in Corinth. This letter is part of the New Testament of the Bible. In it he says:

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The significance of this passage is first the date it was written, approximately 20 years after Jesus died on the cross. In fact, all the books of the New Testament were written within the lifetimes of the direct eye-witnesses of Jesus' ministry starting with the book of James which scholars believe was written 11 years after Jesus' crucifixion. All of these New Testament books from the Bible were also written by the eye-witnesses themselves or their direct associates. In this particular passage, it also makes references to this message being preached earlier, and many scholars believe that this is part of a creed that found its roots approximately 2-8 years after the crucifixion. Either way, my point is, many people today believe that the concept of Christ rising from the dead is the result of legend and myth not history, but the evidence shows that the earliest followers of Christ believed this to be true, and one of the main reasons for this is because many of them claimed to have personally seen Jesus alive and had spent time with him after he had risen from the dead.

Paul himself, the author of this letter was originally a Jewish leader whose goal was to destroy the threat to his Jewish faith by destroying Christianity. This included executing followers of Christ. But shortly after his participation in the stoning of Stephen for preaching the Gospel (Acts 7:54-8:1), Paul himself encountered Jesus after his resurrection and made a complete 180° turn in his outlook (Acts 9). He ultimately became one of the greatest defenders of the Christian faith before he ultimately died for that faith.

My second point is this, since there were over 500 people who claimed to have personally seen Jesus alive in the flesh after his crucifixion, it would have made sense for the Romans or the Jewish authorities who were combating Christianity to reveal Jesus' body in order to end this movement. What better way than to show that these people were liars? But this didn't happen. Instead, their explanation for the empty tomb was that Christ's Disciples stole the body even though they had placed guards at the tomb.

Sounds like a reasonable explanation. The problem is those same Disciples had already scattered by then. They had no expectation that Jesus would be returning. The other important point is that all of the remaining 11 Disciples claimed to have seen Jesus resurrected, and with the exception of John who was exiled, they all died defending that as truth. Now I can believe somebody dying for their faith because they truly believe it's the truth even without evidence, people do that even today... but it's a completely different story to die for something you know for a fact is a lie that you fabricated. This would be the case if the Disciples had stolen the body. One reasonable explanation that fits the facts (and I would argue that it is the most logical explanation) is that Jesus must have resurrected. Sure, common sense tells us that people don't rise from the dead, but if you believe in a God who can create life, why doubt His ability to raise the dead?

The reality is there are plenty of experts and leaders in their field of study who can talk you through the evidence behind the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus nearly 2000 years ago. I'm not talking about some self-proclaimed expert who has a nice looking website. You get those kinds of people from both sides of the debate. Instead, I'm referring to serious scholars who have dedicated their lives to research and are recognized for their work by their peers. There are doctors, theologians, historians, and archeologists who can show that Christianity stands up to rational and critical analysis.

Now let me make something perfectly clear: None of the evidence discussed by the experts can prove beyond any doubt that Jesus rose from the dead. At the same time, there is no way to disprove the resurrection either. That's why there are two sides to the debate. The evidence for the resurrection simply provides corroboration and shows us that the Christian faith isn't blind. There is no direct evidence such as continuous video footage of Jesus dying on the cross, being buried, rising three days later, and then hanging around for 40 days before rising up to the heavens. Even if such evidence existed there would always be people who would doubt it. There is however a great deal of compelling evidence. My point is this: The resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't simply some legend that formed over centuries, but a carefully documented piece of history written down when it happened. But if we look at the evidence and recognize that Jesus rose from the dead, what does this all mean? It means we'd better take a serious look at why Jesus gave himself over to death and what it means to us that he rose from the dead.

First, I'd like to go back to my last devotional. In that devotional I talked about the fact that God is perfectly Holy and perfectly Just. It's because of His Holiness or His perfectly moral nature that He cannot tolerate being in the presence of sin. To accept sin or immorality would mean He would no longer be Holy or perfectly moral. That means anybody who holds onto their sin cannot know God. In addition, He is a God of Justice and demands that all sin be punished. After all, a God who allows injustice to go unpunished would not be worthy to be called a good or moral God. In addition, I talked about the fact that His moral standard is absolute and unchanging, and is clearly defined in the Bible as being moral perfection right down to the very thoughts in our minds. In Romans 3:23 it says "For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God." That means there isn't a single human being, past, present, or future, Christian or non-Christian who is without sin. The only exception was Jesus Christ who was God in human form.

So what exactly is sin? Until we know what that is, we can't really understand any of this. Some people view sin as simply being the extremes, like murder. Perhaps it's just breaking the 10 commandments... but what does the Bible say sin is?

The definition of sin is essentially rebellion against God. It isn't simply physical acts of murder, stealing, adultery, or some of these more obvious things. Mind you, those things are sin as well because they go against how God calls us to live. Sin goes well beyond just what you do on the surface. God looks directly at your heart and evaluates your motives and your innermost thoughts. The Bible teaches that all external acts of sin are the result of sinful thinking and evil desires. That's why simply controlling what bubbles up to the surface isn't what counts; it's dealing with the very root of the problem and changing our inward thinking and desires and to strive to be Holy ourselves. The problem with this is that the Bible also teaches that none of us are capable of doing this on our own (Romans 3:10-12). So then what hope is there for us?

The point is our hope can only be found in Christ alone. Romans 6:23 says "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" It is through recognizing we are sinful, and having faith that Jesus died to save us from our sins. This perfect standard that Jesus describes is meant to make us realize that it is futile for us to try to reach God on our own. If you look at other major religions, it's all about our actions and works. They say God will accept us if we do enough good and limit our evil. Christians on the other hand recognize that these acts aren't enough and that our only hope is the mercy of God which revealed itself through Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9

⁸*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*⁹*not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Titus 3:4-7

⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

I mentioned earlier three critical points that make or break Christianity. First, that Christ lived a sinless life, secondly that he died on the cross, and finally that he rose from the dead. Why are these things critical? Being God in the flesh, Jesus was the only one who was absolutely righteous and met God's standard in every way. That's why he alone was capable to redeem us because he was the only perfect sacrifice. His death on the cross meant that he gave himself over to absorb the full wrath of God, the punishment that we deserved for our sin. Finally, his resurrection showed that he was victorious over death and was able to release the hold sin has on our lives once and for all.

If you're the type of person who thinks you're pretty good and you don't need to be saved from your sin, I think you should reconsider. God's made it clear that none of us come even close to meeting His standard and as a result will face the penalty of our sin. If you're the type of person who thinks your sin is too great, that there's no way God could ever forgive somebody like you, you too need to look at what God Himself said. He said that if you simply believe that Jesus died for you and paid for your sins once and for all, you would inherit eternal life. If you claim to believe in the deity of Jesus but deny his ability to forgive you, then you deny God's power and you call him a liar. The truth is none of us are worthy of His mercy, yet He freely gives it to all who accept it. Finally, if you are one who has accepted the saving Grace of God, it doesn't end there. We too are to continually strive to rid ourselves of sin and to live as He calls us to live.

To conclude, I'll say what I say at the end of every devotional. If you have any doubts or questions, seek the answers and read God's Word. Study the evidence if you are a skeptic, you may be surprised at how compelling it is. Finally, if the evidence convinces you, then take God's Word seriously and recognize that our only hope for salvation is in Christ alone.