

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Number:			Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Acts 2:23, 24		
Date:	March 23, 2014 a.m.		

The Apostolic Apologetic for the Gospel

There is a popular hymn, one that most of you, if not all of you, have sung. It is the hymn “He Lives.” In many ways, it is a fine Christian hymn – but it does contain a phrase in the chorus that, in my opinion, is absolutely deplorable. It is the very last line, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” Speaking apologetically, this is a weak defense of the resurrection of Christ! Perhaps the writer of the hymn, Alfred H. Ackley, intended otherwise, but as it stands, this sentiment has been (and still is) used to interpret the resurrection of Christ in *ONLY* a spiritual sense. Note the words of B.B. Warfield as he describes this type of *unmiraculous Christianity*. “Accordingly, we have now for more than a whole generation, been told over and over again, and with ever-increasing stridency of voice, that it makes no manner of difference whether Jesus rose from the dead or not. The main fact, we are told, is not whether the body that was laid in the tomb was resuscitated. Of what religious value, we are asked, can that purely physical fact be to any man? The main fact is that Jesus – that Jesus who lived in the world a life of such transcendent attractiveness, going about doing good, and by His unshaken and unshakable faith in providence revealed to men the love of a Father-God, - this Jesus, though He underwent the inevitable experience of change which men call death, yet still lives. Lives! – lives in His Church; or at least lives in that heaven to which He pointed us as the home of our Father, and to which we may all follow Him from the evils of this life; or in any event lives in the influence which His beautiful and inspiring life still exerts upon His followers and through them in the world. This, this, we are told, is the fact of real religious value; the only fact upon which the religious emotions can take hold; by which the religious life can be quickened; and through which we may be impelled to religious effort and strengthened in religious endurance.”¹ Peter understood the resurrection in an entirely different light than that suggested by the hymn, “*He Lives*.”

I. THE HISTORICAL FACT: “YOU CRUCIFIED” AND “WHOM GOD RAISED UP”

Christianity is built upon an *historical* event. It was not something that was invented, it was something that *happened*. Note how this is recorded in the pages of the New Testament. The verb PROSPĒXANTES, trans. “you did crucify” lit. means “to nail to” – a vivid picture of the act of crucifixion. All through this sermon, Peter is quick to arraign his listeners and accuse them of murder. He contrasts their treatment of Jesus with that of God’s treatment. The Gospel writers recorded the resurrection as historical fact. They do not attempt to *prove* it or *explain* it. They simply state what they saw and heard, and what happened to them. The account in John 20:1-9 is typical. Here we read of three individuals at the empty tomb: Mary Magdalene, Peter and John. Mary concluded that someone had stolen the body. She “saw” (the word is BLEPO, to glance at, see quickly) from the outside of the tomb.² Peter “saw” (the word is THEOREO, a close examination). He looked at all the details very carefully but remained puzzled. John “saw” (the word is EIDON, to look) and *believed*. He understood the *meaning* of the empty tomb and immediately came to the conviction that Jesus was alive. All three saw (1) that the stone was rolled away (not to let Jesus out but to let witnesses in), and (2) they saw the tomb was empty and the grave clothes lying undisturbed.

II. THE DIVINE APPROVAL: “FREEING HIM FROM THE AGONY OF DEATH” – What does this mean?

- A. The Atoning Sacrifice of Christ was Valid. The Father placed His “amen” on the Son’s “It is finished” (John 19:30). “Jesus laid His sacrifice before the Father’s Throne. The Father accepted it and raised Him from the dead.”³
- B. The Basis For Our Acceptance With God Secured. This is Paul’s point in Romans 4:24, 25. Christ’s resurrection is the basis for our future bodily resurrection (cf. I Corinthians 15). It means that Christ’s righteousness is ours by faith.

NOTE: The resurrection of Christ is not the ground of the forgiveness of sin. Our sins were blotted out by Christ’s death, by the shedding of His blood; Jesus rose from the dead to *guarantee* our justification.⁴

III. THE PERFECT VICTORY: “BECAUSE IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR DEATH TO KEEP ITS HOLD ON HIM.”

Christ conquered death. Why was it impossible for death to hold Him? To answer this, consider the question: Why did Jesus go to the cross to die in the first place?⁵ The New Testament declares that Christ died for sinners (Romans 5:6, 8; I Corinthians 15:3; I Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:28). This was the reason for His coming (Mark 10:45). His death was to atone for sins. Now what is the penalty for sin? Death (I Corinthians 15:56). When the Lord Jesus died, He died for sinners. He blotted out our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5, 11). Once the power of sin had been broken, *Death* had no grounds for holding Him. He was sinless – He died representatively, and therefore sin and death have been conquered by Him. As Calvin said, “It was not possible for Christ to be mastered by death inasmuch as He is the Author of life.”⁶ Thomas Walker underscored the theme of God’s sovereignty by saying, “It was ‘not possible’ in view of the divine purpose and promise (vv. 25-8), and in view of the fact that His atoning work must needs be consummated. If Christ were the Son of God and His sacrifice on Calvary efficacious, and if His victory over death were to be a reality, then the resurrection was an absolute necessity (Rom. i. 4; iv. 25; Heb. ii. 14, 15).”⁷

CONCLUSION: Christianity stands or falls with the historical facts recorded in the New Testament. These historical facts (the birth, deeds, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth) constitute its substance, and as Warfield concludes, “to be indifferent to them is to be indifferent to the substance of Christianity.”⁸ Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered sin and death. What does this mean to us? The resurrection of Christ gives *authority, power, confidence* and *urgency* to the preaching of the Gospel. We have a message to give to a lost and perishing world – and we have the Great Shepherd of the sheep, risen and alive to guide us (Hebrews 13:20, 21). As John Stott aptly put it, “It is not enough to ‘proclaim Jesus.’ For there are many different Jesuses being presented today. According to the New Testament gospel, however, he is *historical* (he really lived, died, rose and ascended in the arena of history), *theological* (his life, death, resurrection and ascension all have saving significance) and *contemporary* (he lives and reigns to bestow salvation on those who respond to him). Thus the apostles told the same story of Jesus at three levels – as historical event (witnessed by their own eyes), as having theological significance (interpreted by the Scriptures), and as contemporary message (confronting men and women with the necessity of decision). We have the same responsibility today to tell the story of Jesus as fact, doctrine and gospel.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ B.B. Warfield, *The Savior of the World* (rpt. Mack, 1972), p. 135.

² Because the gospels report the resurrection narratives with variations at points, some New Testament scholars say that the accounts are in conflict with one another and are therefore suspect. These critics are effectively answered by John Wenham in his book, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict* (Zondervan, 1984).

³ Thomas C. Vander Heuvel, "Preaching the Resurrection," in *The Outlook* vol. 43, No. 4, Apr. 1993. I am indebted to Vander Heuvel for the structure of my analysis.

⁴ Cf. the excellent discussion on Rom. 4:25 by John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 155-157.

⁵ Please note the language of v. 23. The death of Christ was no accident. Jesus was not caught up in circumstances over which He had no control (cf. John 10:18). The death of Christ was according to "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (NIV). The word "foreknowledge" does not simply refer to God's knowledge of future events. Note that this is grouped with the word "God's set purpose," or as the KJV has it, "determinate counsel." Note also the little word "and" that joins the two terms. The construction of the phrase in the Greek text follows what is known as the Granville Sharp rule. This grammatical rule states that when two singular nouns are joined by the conjunction KAI and governed by the definite article "the," they refer to the same thing. The set purpose and foreknowledge of God each express the same idea: The sovereign decree of God which He purposed before the creation of the world (John 17:24 and Eph. 1:4).

⁶ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles*, I (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 67.

⁷ T. Walker, *Acts of The Apostles* (rpt. Kregel, 1965), p. 76.

⁸ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁹ J.R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and The World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990), p. 81.