



Resurrection: Response Required!

Easter Weekend 2015

Acts 17:16-34

David Sunday

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When Jesus died on the cross, He cried, "It is finished!" It was a cry of triumph. His work was accomplished. On Easter Sunday, as God raised Him from the dead, He said, "Amen, My Son! It is finished. I am satisfied with what You accomplished on that cross."

Good Friday was the lightning bolt of our salvation; Easter Sunday is God's thunderclap. However, a response is required from each one of us if we want to benefit from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. My aim is simple. I want to persuade you that, if Jesus is risen from the dead, He will be your Judge, and you must repent.

Resurrection. Judgment. Repentance. Those last two words tend to make us uncomfortable. They sound threatening, narrow, intolerant. On Easter, we like to think of things like springtime, flowers, lilies, new clothes, jellybeans, chocolate bunnies and dinner with family and friends. I hope we enjoy all of those things today and in the days to come, but I have you here for just a few minutes and would like to proclaim to you what the Bible says about the resurrection. When the Bible speaks of resurrection, it says things like this: "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Therefore, He will be the Judge of all people. Because and in light of this, we all must repent."

I want to show you that this is the Bible's teaching and I want to show you that this is good news, the best news in the world. The best thing that could happen to any one of us is that we would turn away from our sin and a life of dependence on ourselves and turn to follow Jesus, because Jesus came into the world to give us life and life more abundantly (John 10:10). This is good news when you hear of judgment and repentance. If you are following Jesus, that is good news.

First, let's see that this is what the Bible teaches. There is no better place to turn for that than the book of Acts where we see the spread of Christianity in the first generation after Jesus rose from the dead and we hear the preaching of the apostles of Jesus. What is central to their preaching is this whole proclamation of resurrection, judgment and repentance. Acts 17 is just one example among many. Here the Apostle Paul, who was a prominent Jewish leader and had

opposed and persecuted Christians until the risen Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, is now following Jesus and preaching the gospel all around Europe and Asia. In this passage, we find him in the city of Athens, the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire and the birthplace of Plato and Socrates. What did Paul proclaim in Athens? We see the climax of his preaching in verses 31-33:

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Now, let’s look at this in reverse logical order. At the end of verse 31, we see a fact: God raised Jesus from the dead as an assurance to all people. That is the fact.

We must then ask, “An assurance of what?” We find the answer to that question at the beginning of verse 31: ...*“because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed...”* The resurrection of Jesus is God’s assurance to all that He will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ.

What are we supposed to do about that? We find that answer in the middle of verse 30: *“...now he commands all people everywhere to repent...”*

So we have a fact (the resurrection) that brings assurance (of judgment), and the response required is repentance. Let’s look at those three things together.

The Fact of the Resurrection

God raised Jesus from the dead as an assurance to all people. It is common today to assert that this might be something primitive people could have believed in back in the 1st Century, but scientifically advanced 21st Century Americans don’t. So we mythologize the resurrection and treat it as a symbol of new beginnings, or we spiritualize it as if it is a metaphor for self-improvement. However, it was no easier for the people of 1st Century Athens to believe in the resurrection than it is for people in 21st Century Chicago to believe in the resurrection.

Just look at what Paul was up against in verses 16-21 as he preached in the intellectual capital of the Roman Empire. First, he dealt with rampant idolatry. We see that in verse 16: *“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.”* The city was full of wonderful art and architecture, but the spirit provoked Paul to see that it was full of idols. Someone in the 1st Century sarcastically said, “It was easier to find an idol in Athens than it was to find a human being.”

This incensed Paul. His spirit was provoked within him when he saw it. So verse 17 says, “*So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews...*” Not only did Paul face rampant idolatry, he also faced opposing philosophies. The Jews would have struggled with the idea of a Messiah being crucified and then raised from the dead. But the text says, “*So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him.*”

We have Jews, Epicureans and Stoics in this passage. We’re somewhat familiar with Jewish thinking but who are there other two?

- The Epicureans taught that the gods were remote from human affairs. Everything in the world is a matter of pure chance and there is no life after death or judgment. Therefore, *carpe diem*, seize the day. “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”
- The Stoics taught that there was a supreme god among many gods. This supreme god was the world’s soul, and he determines everything. This religion was very fatalistic. You have to accept life as it is and live according to nature, cultivating a studied indifference toward both pleasure and pain. *Que sera, sera*. Whatever will be, will be. Fate rules.

Paul preached on the resurrection in this pluralistic atmosphere and it elicited a variety of responses. The middle of verse 18 says, “*And some said, ‘What does this babbler wish to say?’*” The word for “babblers” there means “seed picker.” Paul was like a chicken to them, pecking at seeds and spouting off ideas without fully understanding them (ESV Study Bible). This was not a compliment.

Others were confused by Paul’s preaching. They said in verse 18, “*He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*” They were thinking of Jesus as just one among other gods and the resurrection (*anastasis*) as another god. They were confused.

In verses 19-20, we see that they called Paul to the court of the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, an elite, intellectual club that served as the guardians of the city’s religion, morality and education. It would have taken a lot of courage for Paul to speak here. Someone has said, “It would be hard to imagine a less receptive or more scornful audience.”

In verse 19, they said to Paul, “*May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.*”

We see in verse 21 that these people of rampant idolatry and opposing philosophies were also a people who had a fascination with novelty. “*Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who*

lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” They were talking about and listening to the latest ideas. Idolatry. Opposing philosophies. A lust for novelty. Does that sound a little bit like our culture today?

A great Russian novelist and historian, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, came to America a few decades ago and observed that we are “a culture of novelty.” It is a culture where truth and consequences are of little value and where our ears are itching, “Tell me something new!” What did Paul tell these people whose ears were itching for something new? He did not start with novelty but with non-negotiable realities about Who God is and what He is like. He gave a crash course on biblical theology in verses 22-30.

The truth is that none of us are going to understand or appreciate what resurrection is about if we do not understand the God Who raised Jesus from the dead. Paul begins verse 22, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, establishing some common ground. He did not insult the people as a bunch of ignorant pagans. He said to them, “*Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.*” Humanity is incurably religious because there is a vacuum in our souls that only God can fill. We are made for God.

Paul said to them, “*For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’*” There is always an underlying fear and anxiety when we worship many gods. That fear is, “What if we miss the one we are supposed to worship the most? What if we get one of these gods wrong? What if we leave something out?”

I don’t know how this idol got this name. It may have been an idol that broke and the inscription fell off, so they said, “We don’t know what to name it. We’ll just put ‘to the unknown god’ on it.” Or maybe they deliberately put an idol there representing the fact that they realized they were ignorant and needed revelation. In God’s great mercy, Paul said to them in verse 23, “*What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.*”

This is good news, friends. God wants to be known. God is knowable. Agnosticism is a smoke screen. God has revealed Himself. He has made Himself known. Christianity stands in the midst of pluralism, idolatry and a lust for novelty and says, “God has revealed Himself and you can know Him.”

Verse 24: “*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man...*” We do not make a place for God in our world; God makes a place for us in His.

Verse 25: “... *nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*” God is not dependent on us; we are dependent on Him, even for the very next breath that fills our lungs.

Verse 26: “*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place...*” In other words, God is not a tribal deity. He is not the God of one certain people group or one among many gods. No, all of humanity owes its origin to this one, true and living God Who gives life to all and Who is the God of all the nations.

He is sovereign over all and He has put each of us in a particular place, at a particular time and for a purpose. That purpose is in verse 27: “...*that they should seek God.*” God put you here right now so that you would seek Him and, perhaps, feel your way to Him and find Him. It is the idea of people groping in the darkness—a darkness that is there because of our sin. It is not because God is hiding.

Paul tells us at the end of verse 27, “*Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...*” That’s good news! God wants us to seek Him and to find Him, and He is not hard to find. He is not far from each one of us.

Look at verse 28: “...*for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.*” We are all God’s offspring, made in God’s image. God is not a figment of humanity’s imagination.

Paul is moving to the crux of his argument in verse 30. For a long time, God allowed the nations of the world to walk in their ways of ignorance, but Paul said, “*The times of ignorance God overlooked...*” That doesn’t mean God excused human ignorance of Him. It just means that God let the nations go their own way. He did not immediately send judgment, nor did He immediately send revelation. But now those times are over. There is no more ignorance excusable in this world. God is not overlooking any longer because God has made Himself known very clearly. He is not going to let the nations walk in darkness anymore.

God has come into our world. He has put on our skin. God has walked our streets. He has breathed our air. God has borne our grief and carried our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4). He has taken our sin, guilt and shame upon Himself on the cross. He has borne our punishment so that He might bring us peace. God has sent His servant, His Son, into the world—His name is Jesus. He has come. No more ignorance will be excused because He has come.

Furthermore, as Paul said in verse 31, God has given assurance to all by raising Jesus from the dead. We have assurance that He is not just a religious teacher; He is not just another philosopher; He is not the latest novel idea; He is not just one among a pantheon of gods. He, Jesus, is Lord of heaven and earth. He is the One Who gives to all people life and breath and everything. He is the Savior Who came to seek and save sinners who are groping in the darkness and cannot find Him. He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). God publicly raised Him from the dead for all the world to see.

Now, this is a fact of history. You might have doubts about the resurrection of Jesus. If you have honest questions, the Bible is more than willing and able to face those questions head-on. My challenge to you this Easter Sunday is that you should not passively stay stuck in your doubts. You cannot stay there forever. You need to dig. You need to pursue. You need to investigate what God has revealed of His Son in His Word because you cannot ignore the resurrection forever. You will face the risen Lord Jesus. You will stand before Him in judgment.

Tim Keller said something very significant. He said, "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that He said. If He didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what He said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like His teaching, but whether or not He rose from the dead."

Christians believe there is abundant evidence for His resurrection for those who are willing to investigate it. So read the Bible; read the Gospels. Talk to believers whose lives have been transformed by Christ. Search for yourself. But don't delay and don't ignore because this resurrection of Jesus gives assurance to all people of an appointment that none of us can escape. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's assurance to every human being that we will all face this same Jesus in judgment.

The Certainty of Judgment

We saw the certainty of judgment at the end of verse 31: "*...and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*" Of what has God given assurance? The answer is at the beginning of verse 31: "*...because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.*" The resurrection of Jesus, therefore, is God's assurance to all people of the certainty of judgment.

Now, that may not sound like good news, but let's establish something: this is what the Bible teaches. There is a day fixed. There is a Judge appointed and we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:10, "*For we must all appear before the*

judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

An old theologian put it like this: “It is not so certain we shall ever see the sun rise again, as it is that we shall see the Day of Judgment” (Archibald Alexander). That is sobering. That should make people shudder. But for believers in Jesus, this is news that should make us rejoice with anticipation. We should be looking forward to this.

Let me tell you why this reality of judgment—this certainty of judgment—is such good news.

First, it is good news because the Bible says it is good news. In Psalms 96, 97 and 98, all of creation is having a party. The reason for the celebration is the fact that God is coming to judge the earth. Listen to the way 96:11-13 puts it:

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

The Bible says, “That’s good news!”

Now, sometimes we say things like this: “I like to think of God as loving and kind, but I don’t like to think of God as Judge.” Whenever you begin a sentence with “I like to think of God as...,” you can rest assured you are going to reveal more about yourself than you are about God. The point is not what we like to think about God, but it is what God has revealed about Himself. The Bible says He is coming to judge. That makes creation stand on its tiptoes in anticipation. It makes all the trees in the forest sing for joy at that announcement. It is good news.

Second, it is good news because we live in a world that has been ravaged by evil and injustice. All our lives have been touched by it. Creation is groaning for One to come Who can set things right. Think about the brutality of history. Think about the bondage of creation: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes. Lives have been lost. Millions have been wiped out. Think about these things and you will agree with Joshua Ryan Butler, who says, “Graveyards of trauma, injustice and death mark our war-torn world. And they cry out for a response.”

Who will account for the innocent blood? Who will hear the cries of injustice rising from our haunted world? God’s announcement that Jesus is going to judge the world is His assurance to us that He has big ears. His ears are hurting, for He has heard the cries of many millions who

have been oppressed by evil and injustice. He is coming to set things right. He is a mighty King and a lover of justice (Psalm 99:4).

Third, this is good news because God's judgment shows us that God cares about what He has made. God is not indifferent toward us. He cares about our lives. We matter greatly to Him. The opposite of love is not anger; it is indifference. Indifference says, "I couldn't care less about you." That is not God's stance toward us.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's announcement to the world that He cares for us too much to allow us to go on ignoring Him any longer. God is saying, "I'm going to make Myself un-ignorable in this world. The people I have created will have to acknowledge Me. They are going to see Me."

If you are a loving parent and your child runs away, you are not going to ignore him. You are going to keep pursuing. You are going to keep calling. You are going to keep sending gifts. You are going to keep pleading and inviting him over. You are going to keep doing that as long as you have breath. You are never going to give up because you love that child.

God is not going to let us walk away from Him easily. He is going to keep pursuing us and one day He is going to summon us into the presence of the very One Who died to save us. We are going to see the marks on His hands from the nails. We are going to see Him risen and reigning. We are going to stand before Him and will see that God's judgment is not a contradiction of His love; it is the very expression of it. God is saying to us, "This is how much your life matters to Me. I will not ignore you or treat what you do with the life I have given you as a matter of indifference."

Last, God's judgment is good news because it is going to be carried out in perfect righteousness by the One Who died to save us. We see that in verse 31: "... because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Jesus, Who was unjustly tried by sinful men, is going to be the just Judge of all. He is so wise that He will not be deluded. He is so strong that He won't be resisted. He is also one of us and, therefore, understands us. He has walked in our shoes and worn our skin. In our legal system, we have the right to be judged by a jury of our peers. When we stand before God in judgment, we are going to stand before One Who has perfect knowledge of what it's like to be one of us. His judgment will be infallible. That is certain and I'm telling you, it is good news.

There is only one reason this would not be good news. That is if you are sneering at the Judge. That is if you are rejecting and rebelling against the One Who is going to stand in judgment over you.

The Urgency of Repentance

Look at verse 32: “*Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.*” Paul did not get to finish his sermon because people started mocking him. They shut him down. The NIV says, “Some of them sneered.” To the Greeks, the idea of the cross was foolishness; resurrection was ridiculous; judgment was laughable. The same thing is true for many, many people today.

I read an article in the New York Times about the social activism of former New York mayor, Michael Bloomberg. At the end of the article, it explained that the mayor is now 72 years old and is about to go to his 50th high school reunion. He has been taken aback by all the obituary notices he has been seeing in the paper for his former classmates. The article concludes like this:

But if he senses that he may not have as much time left as he would like, he has little doubt about what would await him at a Judgment Day. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity and smoking cessation, he said with a grin: “I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.”

Those were his exact words. I’m not telling you this to pick on Mayor Bloomberg. In fact, I prayed for him this morning, “Lord, open his eyes.” I’m telling you this because he had the temerity to speak aloud what millions of us are thinking in our minds. “I’ve earned my place. I’m not afraid of judgment.”

We should shudder at that thought because the only One Who has the right to head straight into heaven is the One Who died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead. Jesus went straight in. Everyone else must pass through Him. Everyone else must come to the Father through Jesus. He is the One Who stands at heaven’s gates and decides who is in and who is out. His judgment is the only one that matters.

That is why Paul was so urgent when he preached this resurrection message. For Paul, this was not a sentimental thing—it was an urgent matter. That’s why Paul said in verse 30, “*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent...*” God commands all people to turn from sin and self and to turn to Jesus. All people must turn from that attitude that says, “If there is a God, when I get to heaven, I am not stopping to be interviewed.”

There is a God. He made you. He gave you life and breath and everything, Paul said. Turn from that prideful thought that says, “I have earned my place in heaven. It is not even close.” Realize that when you see Jesus dying on the cross, He is bearing the wrath your sins deserve. That is what it costs to enter heaven.

Verses 32-34 show us three different responses to the resurrection. What will your response be?

- In verse 32, some of them mocked. They dismissed the resurrection. They dismissed Paul’s preaching. God’s respect for human dignity is so great that He will let you reject Him, but you will live forever with the regrets of having rejected the One Who came to save you.
- Some dismissed; others deferred. They said in verse 32, “*We will hear you again about this.*” That is better than just throwing it out. Sometimes we need to do that. We need to count the cost of what it takes to follow Jesus. It is not good to make a rash response without counting the cost. Before we follow Jesus, most of us spend a little time here, needing to hear some more. If that is where you are, that is what reading the Gospel of Luke is all about. We would love to talk with you about that. However, if you are in that middle place—deferring—and saying, “I need to hear more; I’d like to hear more about this,” I want to urge you to make sure that is not just an excuse to ultimately dismiss a proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus. God has not promised us tomorrow. When God says, “I command everyone everywhere to repent,” He is saying today, right now. “When you hear My voice, now is the time to respond,” because there might not be a tomorrow.
- Finally, we see that some of them decided to believe. Verse 34: “*But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.*” I wonder if they are named here because you fully become the person God created you to be when you follow Jesus.

What will your response be—dismiss, defer or decide?

If you have been moved by God through His Spirit as you have heard the proclamation of the resurrection, the singing and the praying, and you want to decide to follow Jesus, this is how you do it:

- A. Acknowledge your sin before God and renounce it.
- B. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe that He died on the cross for you—to forgive you, save you, cleanse you from the guilt and shame of your sins and make you a child of God.
- C. Commit your life to Him. Hand Him the reigns. Say, “Jesus, I want to follow You. Wherever You lead and however You teach me, I want to follow You. You will be Lord and Master of my life.”

I'm going to lead us in prayer right now. If you want to become a follower of Jesus, this is your opportunity to respond to Him. Jesus is ready to receive you. One of the early church fathers, Athanasius, said, "Jesus had to die on the cross—this most public, painful, humiliating form of execution imaginable. He had to die that way because it is only on a cross that a man dies with his arms stretched out wide, as if to say, 'Come to Me. I will receive you.'"

Come to Jesus. Join me now in prayer.

Heavenly Father, thank You that You created me. You give me life and breath and everything. In You, I live and move and have my being. Father, I acknowledge that I have sinned. I have fallen short of Your glory and my sin is so great that it required Your Son to die on a cross for me. I thank You, Jesus, that on that cross You were bearing the guilt and shame of my sins, so that I can be forgiven. I believe in You, Lord Jesus. I believe that what You did on that cross is enough for me. I commit my life to following You. Lord Jesus, teach me Your ways. Lead me in Your truth. Show me what it means to live wholly for You. I love You, Lord, and I thank You for loving me first. Amen.

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