

Resurrection Sunday
April 16, 2017

Not Done in a Corner

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest moment in human history so far. I say "so far" because the resurrection has changed the course of human events. We are now moving toward the inevitable and dramatic resolution of world history.

Jesus Christ will return to bring everlasting life to all of God's people and to establish the kingdom of God over all the earth. Our world will once again be a paradise and there will be no more war, death, or sorrow, but life and joy and peace.

Now we sometimes forget and the world doesn't understand that the Bible builds all of its doctrines and teachings upon historical events, upon what has really taken place. Biblical Christianity is not built on fantasy, but upon facts. In fact we have the same kind of documentary historical evidence for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we have for the life and presidency of George Washington.

E. M. Blaiklock of Auckland University in New Zealand was one of the world's most prominent scholars in the classics and antiquity. Here is what he said about the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "I claim to be an historian. My approach to the Classics is historical. And I tell you that the evidence for the life, death and the resurrection of Christ is better authenticated than most of the facts of ancient history."

So now, in your mind, let's travel back to 60AD. We are going to a city called Caesarea in Israel, on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It's a beautiful day and a Roman official named Porcius Festus has arrived by ship to be the new governor of Judea. He has barely had time to settle in when he is met with his first problem.

His predecessor, a man named Felix, has left in prison for two years a man named Paul. And he has done this for two reasons. First, Paul had been relentless in speaking how Jesus had been crucified and then had been raised up from the dead. This proved that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. And this upset the Jewish authorities. So Paul was kept in prison to please them. Secondly Felix, the former governor had hoped for a monetary bribe in order to release Paul. Let's read the story in Acts 25.

Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. ²Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, ³asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem—while *they* lay in ambush along the road to kill him.
(Acts 25:1-3)

When Festus went to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of Israel these leaders made charges against Paul and wanted him brought to the city. First, in the hope of killing him before he arrived in Jerusalem, but secondly, in the hope of having home field advantage if he were put on trial.

But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going *there* shortly. ⁵“Therefore,” he said, “let those who have authority among you go down with *me* and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him.”

⁶And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. ⁷When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, ⁸while he answered for himself, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.”

⁹But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?”
(Acts 25:4-9)

I want you to understand something. Festus was not a weak man. He was not caving in to the Jewish authorities, because he asked Paul to go to Jerusalem. Festus was a very stern Roman official. In fact, later on he so brutally suppressed a riot in Caesarea that he was recalled to Rome. But Festus wants Paul tried in Jerusalem, because he doesn't know what to do with him!

Festus doesn't know what criminal charges to bring against Paul. The Jewish leaders were accusing Paul of preaching that a dead man named Jesus

was crucified as a criminal, but then God raised him up from the dead. Paul was preaching that through faith in Jesus Christ all of your sins can be forgiven and you can have love, joy, peace and everlasting life. Christianity was growing and spreading and the Jewish leaders couldn't put a stop to it.

Everyone in Jerusalem knew that Jesus had been crucified. Everyone knew that he had died and was buried. And everyone knew that three days and three nights later the tomb where Christ was buried was empty. So what happened to the body?

No one stole it, because believe me if the disciples had stolen the body word would have eventually gotten out. And the Roman soldiers would have arrested them, flogged them and perhaps put them to death. Also if the Jewish authorities had the body of Jesus they would have put it on public display and put an end to Christianity.

So Festus wants Paul to go to Jerusalem, because he doesn't know what to do with him. The Jewish leaders want Paul there to kill him. Therefore Paul appealed to the Supreme Court of his day. He appeals to Caesar.

But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?"¹⁰ So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know.
(Acts 25:9, 10)

If a Roman citizen, like Paul, felt he wasn't getting a fair trial, he could appeal to Caesar and by pass all the lower courts. The prisoner would be sent to Rome with written charges against him. And Festus said that Paul could go to Rome, but he doesn't know how to write a charge against him. A Roman governor knows what to do about an insurrection, but what do you do about a resurrection?

At this point enter King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. And Festus is happy for the visit. Maybe Agrippa can help out in this matter with Paul. The is Herod Agrippa the Second—the last of the Herods. His Father Herod Agrippa the First was the king who put the apostle James to death. His uncle was Herod Antipas before whom Jesus Christ was tried. And his great-grandfather was Herod the Great who had all the baby boys of Bethlehem slaughtered after Jesus was born. His sister Bernice had been married to a Roman official and was now in an incestuous relationship with Agrippa.

And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. ¹⁴ When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him.

¹⁶ To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.' ¹⁷ Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in.

¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, ¹⁹ but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. ²⁰ And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. ²¹ But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar." ²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him."
(Acts 25:13-22)

Notice carefully verse 20 where Festus says, "I was uncertain of such questions." The English Standard Version of the Bible translates this as "I was at a loss how to investigate such matters." For Festus all of this talk about a resurrection was incomprehensible. Paul's not a guilty criminal, just a religious nut! Festus is a broad-minded, sophisticated intellectual. He doesn't believe in resurrections, but you can if you wish to,

So Festus doesn't know what to do with this problem. King Agrippa is a different story. He knows the Jewish Scriptures. He knows about Jesus and the growth of Christianity. He wants to hear from Paul and so a meeting is set up.

So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had

come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. (Acts 25:23)

Boy! This must have been quite an affair!

And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. ²⁵ But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. ²⁶ I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. ²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: ² "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, ³ especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.

⁴ "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. ⁵ They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. ⁶ And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. (Acts 25:23- 26:6)

Agrippa knew the Scriptures. He knew the hope was for a Messiah, a Savior who would rule a world-wide kingdom of peace and righteousness. And

all of God's people would live in this kingdom forever, which meant that believers who had died would need to be resurrected. That Messiah, Jesus had come and he died as a sacrifice for our sins and God raised him up from the dead. Therefore that new age to which the Scriptures pointed had been inaugurated. Paul continues,

And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. ⁷To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. ⁸Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?
(Acts 26:6-8)

Paul asked why he should be charged as a criminal for believing the Scriptures. And why should it be thought incredible for God to raise the dead? That is the question for our day as well! If there is a God and He created all things then He can certainly recreate.

The Scriptures promised that God's Messiah would not see corruption in the grave. And Christ's tomb was empty. But unbelief always has a thousand reasons why there is no God and why Christ was not raised up from the dead. And yet an honest examination of the facts makes the resurrection of Christ as reasonable and as sure as any fact of history.

Paul then continued speaking and he told how he once hated Christians and persecuted them and voted for them to be killed. Then he met the risen, living Lord Jesus Christ and his life took on a new meaning and purpose. And he devoted his life to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and the hope of everlasting life in God's coming kingdom—even as a prisoner. Why would he do that? The answer is that if Jesus Christ really is alive, if he has been raised up from the dead, nothing else really matters. Nothing else is more important to know.

While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, ¹³at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*' ¹⁵So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are

persecuting.

¹⁶ But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. ¹⁷ I will deliver you from the *Jewish* people, as well as *from* the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes, *in order* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

¹⁹ "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. ²¹ For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill *me*. ²² Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— ²³ that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

²⁴ Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"
(Acts 26:12-24)

Festus was astonished that a learned scholar like Paul could actually believe in a resurrection. Festus is a realist, no one rises from the dead. So this is all crazy, or is it?

But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. ²⁶ For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." 29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

(Acts 26:25-29)

Festus is your intellectual atheist. He understands real life. He has a grip on reality better than simple, religious people. And he is tired of all this religious talk. But King Agrippa is another story. Agrippa was uncomfortable. He knew Jesus was crucified and buried. He knew Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, where Jesus was buried was empty. He knew that no one had ever found the body. He knew that there were eye-witnesses of the risen Christ. Many of whom were still alive at the time and could be called to testify. Let's read verse 26 again.

For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.

Christianity is not built upon fantasy or speculation. It's not a hoax; not a lie. It is built on historical fact. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was not done in a corner.

Agrippa was nervous. He knows what Paul said was true. But if a person's sinful life is more important than being right with God the he or she must deny reality.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." 29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.

(Acts 26:27-29)

If Christianity is a lie, a hoax, a delusion; if Jesus Christ is not the risen Savior, the Son of God, then nothing else really matters. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die and become absorbed into a meaningless cosmos. But if Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, if God has truly raised him up from the dead, then nothing else really matters!

This Resurrection Sunday is a great day for those of us who believe and are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. It is a day of victory assuring us of our future hope of glory and everlasting life. And for those who doubt, this day is a day of

God's mercy, love and grace. For He says to you, "Come and see." Turn your eyes upon Jesus and find the life you long to live. Amen