

Acts 24:14-16, 21

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you read the sermons preached by the Apostles that are recorded for us in the book of Acts you will notice that they always talk about the resurrection of Jesus. Paul's great resurrection sermon in 1 Corinthians 15 reminds us why they always talked about the resurrection of Jesus. As Paul says, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead our faith is worthless. Jesus is not the Messiah, our savior. In fact, when the Christian author, Josh McDowell, was an Atheist and was having trouble convincing a certain Christian to give up his faith, he asked this Christian if there was anything that would make him give up his faith. The Christian answered that McDowell would have to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. McDowell set out to do just that, but in the process he became a Christian himself, and like Paul, he became a powerful speaker on the subject.

For Paul, for the Apostles, for us and all Christians of all time, it's all about the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection proves that he is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. His resurrection proves that there will be a resurrection of the righteous and the wicked.

Knowing the background that led up to what Paul is saying here helps us understand how he was able to use this as an opportunity to talk about the resurrection.

Paul had finished his third mission journey. He had gathered an offering from the gentile churches to help the poor and needy in Jerusalem. He had arrived in time to celebrate the festival of Pentecost and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem had asked him to sponsor some Jewish Christians who wanted to offer some sacrifices at the Temple. He agreed. But some Jews from Asia saw him in the temple courts and accused him of bringing gentiles into the temple and defiling it. As the crowds were trying to kill Paul the Romans came to his rescue. After discovering a plot to kill Paul the Romans sent him off to Caesarea. The Sanhedrin then hired a lawyer and came to Caesarea to accuse Paul at a hearing before the governor Felix. After declaring that he was innocent of the accusations being brought against him and pointing out that the only people who could properly accuse him of desecrating the temple weren't present, he admits to one thing that they did have against him. He is a follower of the Way.

The Way was an early term for Christians. The term Christian was not used until mission work was done among Gentiles in Antioch. It seems that early believers were called followers of the Way because they pointed to Jesus as the Way—Jesus said that he was the Way, the truth and the life. Paul admits that he is a follower of the Way, that he believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the only way to heaven. But, he points out that Christianity isn't some new sect or heresy. He doesn't worship an idol or some new or strange God. He is still worshiping the God of the patriarchs, the same God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshiped, the same God his accusers claimed to worship. What he believes is in **agreement with the Law and the Prophets**, with everything taught in the Old Testament Scriptures.

As we heard in the Gospel lesson, that's exactly what Jesus told the Emmaus disciples. He chided them for not seeing that everything that had happened, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion, his death and his resurrection; all had been foretold in the Old Testament. He asked them, **Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.** If Jesus was an imposter; if Jesus had failed to fulfill even just one of the prophecies; if he had not been a descendant of David; if he had not been betrayed by someone close to him; if he had not been executed by crucifixion; if they had not cast lots for his clothing;

if he had not been buried in the tomb of a rich man; he would have been a failure and we would expect that God would have abandon him in the grave. But the fact that he raised Jesus from the dead as Isaiah foretold and as Jesus himself foretold, proves that he fulfilled every little detail of the prophecies and that he is indeed the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

Christianity isn't just 2000 years old. Christianity is the one true religion. It's the religion not only of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but of Job, and Noah, and Enoch, and Adam and Eve. The Bible may have two parts, the Old and the New Testament, but it's one book. It doesn't contain two religions. It doesn't teach two different ways to heaven. There is and always has been only one way of salvation. God revealed it to Adam and Eve in the garden. Salvation is only through faith in a promised Savior who would crush the serpent's head. The only difference between Adam and Eve and us is that we know the promised Savior's name. Jesus' resurrection proves to us that he is the one God was talking about in the Garden of Eden. With Paul, **we believe everything that is in agreement with the Law and that is written in the Prophets.**

Make sure that you remember this if ever you run into those who try to convince you that Islam, or Buddhism or some other ancient religion is better than Christianity because it's older. Christianity is not new. It is not a sect. It is the original, only true religion. And since we believe this; since we believe that Jesus simply fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament; since we say with Paul that we believe everything written in the Old Testament; should we not make sure that we include the Old Testament in our reading and study of the Scriptures?

Before this hearing before Governor Felix, Paul had had a previous hearing in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin. He realized that there was no way he would get a fair trial in that venue and so he used his knowledge of the make up of the Sanhedrin to his advantage. He knew that the Sanhedrin was made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees. He knew that the Pharisees believed in angels and in the bodily resurrection of all the dead. He knew that the Sadducees denied these things and that the two groups often argued about them. So, at one point during the hearing he shouted, **it is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.** He knew this would get them arguing among themselves and have the Pharisees defend him, which it did. Paul states that if his accusers have anything against him, this would be it. He believes in the bodily resurrection of the dead and therefore, that Jesus rose from the dead. But what does it mean for Paul, for those accusing him, for Governor Felix, and for us that Jesus' body rose from the dead? It confirms what the Bible has always taught, that there will be a resurrection of all the dead, believers and unbelievers, righteous and unrighteous. Everyone who has ever lived on this earth will one day stand, soul and body, before God.

Like the Sadducees of Paul's day, there are still many who want to deny the resurrection of the body. Some will say that it is only the soul that lives on through all eternity. That seems easier to believe. Even non-Christians believe in the immortality of the soul even if it's through reincarnation. Some will say that only believers will be raised because they can't bear to think of someone's body being tormented in Hell for all eternity. But with Job and Daniel and Jesus and Paul, we confess that the Bible clearly teaches that everyone, believers and unbelievers, righteous and unrighteous will be physically raised from the dead and soul and body will live forever either with God, what we call heaven, or without him, what we call Hell. That's why Paul calls Jesus' resurrection the first fruits. Because his physical body, a body that could be identified and touched, a body that could eat, rose from the dead we can be assured that our bodies will also be raised.

There are a lot of questions we could ask about what our bodies will be like when they are raised, but Paul doesn't answer those questions here, nor does the Bible give us a lot of information elsewhere. God just wants us to know that our bodies will be raised to live forever. And, Paul says, this fact motivates us to have a clear conscience before God and man. It warns us to avoid sin and to use our bodies as instruments of righteousness, in ways that are good and pleasing to God. It warns us not to turn away from God in unbelief because there is a resurrection and there is a Hell. But it also encourages us. We are reminded that Jesus lived, died and rose again to pay for all our sins. He purchased us to be his own. He redeemed not just our souls but also our bodies which right now are already his temples. Any physical pain or suffering we experience now will be removed as we pass through death to life, as our bodies are put back together by the creator as glorified bodies, and he tells us what that means-- that they will not be subject to sickness, pain, disease, aging or death.

For Paul and the other Apostles, and therefore for us, it's all about the resurrection. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead proves to us that he is the Messiah who fulfilled every prophecy perfectly. He is the one and only Savior, the one that God promised to Adam and Eve. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead proves to us that there is a resurrection from the dead as the Bible teaches. All will be raised; unbelievers to suffer body and soul forever; but believers, to live, body and soul in God's presence forever.