

Resurrection & Repentance
Acts 25:23-26:32
ABC 4/21/19

If I were to ask, *What is the most crucial question you would like answered?* We'd probably get many answers. Some might say, *Whom should I marry?* Others may say, *What career should I pursue?* Or, *Where can I find a good-paying job?* Some might want to know, *How can my spouse & I live in harmony?* Or maybe it's simply, *When will my kids move out of my house?* These are all questions of various importance. But the most crucial question we all must answer is Jesus' question to His disciples, **Who do you say that I am?** (Mt 16:15). Your answer to that question not only determines how you'll live the rest of your life, but also where you'll spend eternity. The correct answer to that question largely rests on the historic fact that Jesus rose from the dead. If that is true, then He is who He claimed to be, the eternal Son of God in human flesh, the Lord of all creation, who is coming to judge the living & the dead. That means you must trust in Him as your Savior & bring all of your thoughts, words, & deeds under His lordship. If you trust in Him as your risen Lord & Savior, He promises that you'll spend eternity with Him. But if it isn't true that Jesus is risen from the dead, then you are still in your sins & your faith in Christ is worthless. (1 Cor 15:17). Paul said that the entire Christian faith stands or falls on this one fact: He is risen! PRAY

Years ago, Dr. Paul Adkins, a leading lung surgeon, looked at his own chest X-ray & realized he was looking at his own obituary. He was dead 4½ months later, at age 55, from lung cancer, the disease he'd treated in hundreds of other patients. The ironic fact was that Dr. Adkins himself had smoked up to 1½ pack of cigarettes daily for 40 years. His mother had smoked & lived to an old age & Dr. Adkins thought he could do the same. Even after he realized he had lung cancer he continued to smoke.¹

If anyone knew the dangers of smoking, Dr. Adkins did, but he didn't apply that knowledge to himself. Knowledge is worthless if we don't apply it. The same is true spiritually. We can know the truth, but if we don't apply it personally, it does us no good. Polls say that 1/3 to ½ of Americans claim to be born again Christians, & yet there's not much difference between how they live & how all other Americans live. The apostle Paul would ask them, *Doesn't the resurrection of Jesus from the dead mean anything to you?* In other words, *Jesus is risen. So what? How should that fact affect*

¹ *Reader's Digest*, 11/82; www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1982/04/20/i-think-i-could/f150f978-5ec3-474f-ae19-18a73d2d1a70/

your life? Acts 26 gives us the longest of Paul's defenses in the book of Acts. Here his defense is before the Roman governor Festus, King Agrippa II, his sister, Bernice, & many dignitaries at the Roman city of Caesarea. Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I (Acts 12). He ruled over Galilee & some other territories to the north. A popular but unproven rumor alleged that Agrippa & Bernice were in an incestuous relationship. She later became the lover of the Roman general & future emperor Titus, whose army destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. Agrippa & Bernice had a sister, Drusilla, who was married to the previous governor, Felix (Acts 24). Drusilla later died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79. **Acts 25:23-26:32**

This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the NT. The spectacle must have been breathtaking. Agrippa would have been decked out in all the trappings of royalty, including a purple robe, golden crown, rings, & maybe a scepter. Bernice, though not technically Agrippa's queen, would have been similarly attired. The 5 tribunes would have been wearing their full-dress uniforms & the prominent men of the city wearing their finest clothes. An immaculately dressed honor guard of soldiers undoubtedly escorted the dignitaries into the auditorium.

This is the 3rd time in Acts that Luke repeats Paul's testimony of his conversion. Here Paul especially focuses on the commission that the risen Lord Jesus gave to him, to go to the Gentiles so they might repent & turn to God (Acts 26:18, 20). His message to us is simply this: Because Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, we all must repent & turn to God. In other words, to say, *I believe in Jesus as my Savior*, but to go on living in the same way as this godless world, does no more good than for a lung surgeon to say, *I believe that smoking causes lung cancer*, but to go on smoking a pack a day. If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, our lives will show it. Repentance is not optional. John Calvin put it this way. *Those who separate God's grace in salvation from repentance pervert the gospel.*² You can't separate repentance from genuine saving faith. It's the mark of genuine conversion. Paul's defense makes 2 main points:

1. Jesus' Resurrection is a Fact of History. Paul is speaking here to a skeptical audience & so he presents his case inductively. He doesn't begin with, *Jesus Christ is risen from the dead*. He'd have

² Calvin's Commentaries, Acts, 2:383

been laughed out of the room. When he finally states this truth, Festus interrupts to say he's out of his mind (Acts 26:24). So Paul begins with the possibility of resurrection in general. Then he describes his own encounter with the risen Lord Jesus & the changes that took place in his life as a result. Then he relates the message that the risen Lord told him to proclaim. Finally, he comes to the foundation for his message, that according to the Scriptures Jesus died & was raised from the dead. He gives 4 proofs of the resurrection:

A. Resurrection is Possible Because of God. Paul begins by telling of his early life in Judaism & identifying himself with the hope of God's promise to the Jews, namely, the coming of the Messiah & His kingdom, & specifically, the resurrection connected with His coming. It was the promise that was made by God throughout the OT that the Messiah would come to take away sin & establish His kingdom of righteousness. That promise would have been worthless to the Jews from past generations if there were no resurrection of the dead. Yet it was for this Jewish hope fulfilled in Christ Jesus that Paul's Jewish kinsmen were accusing him. The absurdity of his being condemned for believing what the Jewish people had always believed caused Paul to exclaim, **Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?** (Acts 26:8). In other words, if you believe in the God of the Bible, you must believe He has the power to raise the dead. &, as Paul will go on to state, the fact that God raised Jesus bodily proves He's the Jewish Messiah. By raising Jesus from the dead, God validated the OT promise of resurrection, while at the same time proving Jesus was Israel's long awaited Messiah. Paul's logic here is solid. If you believe in the God who created all things & who spoke life into existence, you must also agree that He has the intrinsic power to raise the dead. That is clearly true. But it was this point that Agrippa, along with many other Jews, wasn't willing to concede. Most Jews (except for the Sadducees, Mt 22:23) accepted the general concept of resurrection (cf. John 5:28-29; 11:24). What they didn't accept was that Jesus rose from the dead & was their Messiah. When confronted with the undeniable fact of His resurrection, the Jewish leaders began a rumor that the disciples stole His body. They even bribed the Roman guards to confirm their lie. So while Agrippa no doubt accepted the general Jewish

belief in resurrection, he, like the other leaders & the nation, didn't accept the resurrection of Christ or His messiahship.

B. Jesus' Resurrection is Proved by Eyewitnesses. Paul goes on in 26:12-16 to recount his own encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road. Skeptics might say Paul only had a vision or hallucination, not the actual risen Lord Jesus. If Paul had been the only one to make such a claim, perhaps we'd have to consider that or at least not build our case on it. But in 1 Cor 15:5-8, Paul states the risen Lord appeared to Peter & the other apostles, as well as to over 500 followers at one time, most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote. Floyd Hamilton states,

It is perfectly possible for one man to have an hallucination, & two men might have the same hallucination by a singular coincidence, but that eleven men of intelligence, whose characters & writings indicate their sanity in other respects, or that 500 men in a body should have the same hallucination & at the same time, stretches the law of probability to the breaking point!³

Concerning Jesus' resurrection another scholar has written,

The most drastic way of dismissing the evidence would be to say that these stories were mere fabrications, that they were pure lies. But, so far as we know, not a single critic today would take such an attitude. In fact, it would really be an impossible position. Think of the number of witnesses, over 500. Think of the character of the witnesses, men & women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, & who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day & a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence—and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense.⁴

Someone may be thinking, *That's great for those who saw the risen Christ. But I've never seen Him. Why should I believe?* You should believe because there's reasonable evidence to believe. We all believe in things we cannot see & in people we do not know. You trust that the people who package the food you buy at the store didn't poison it. You trust the mechanic who fixed your brakes did a good job. You trust the teller at the bank to deposit your money in your account & not someone else's. If you trust the witness of men, the witness of God concerning His Son is far greater (1 Jn 5:9). He will hold you accountable if you reject the eyewitness testimony He's given

³ *Teacher's Manual for the Ten Basic Steps Toward Christian Maturity*, Campus Crusade for Christ, p 104

⁴ JND Anderson, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, Christianity Today, 3/29/68, pp 5-6

regarding the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ's resurrection is possible because of who God is & what He's said. It's proven by eyewitnesses, & by the...

C. Changed Lives of the Witnesses. To show how startling & complete the transformation of his life was, Paul began his testimony by describing his life before his conversion. He'd been relentless in persecuting Christians. He says he **punished them often**, tried to **force them to blaspheme** & was **furiously enraged** at them (Acts 26:11). He'd been as zealous & committed as any Jew of his day (Gal 1:13-14) & was an extremely unlikely prospect for conversion. & yet here he is, a prisoner for the cause of Christ, having endured much persecution himself because of his faith in Jesus, but he's not bitter or hateful toward his enemies. How did this hate-driven religious terrorist change into a man compelled by the love of Christ, willing to lay down his life to tell others about Jesus? The only explanation is that he had seen the risen Savior. All the other apostles had also been radically transformed. Nothing explains their changed lives other than the fact of Jesus' life, death, & resurrection.

D. Jesus' Resurrection is Supported by Fulfilled Prophecy. Paul affirms that he's saying nothing except what the Prophets & Moses had said would take place, **that the Christ was to suffer, & that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people & to the Gentiles** (Acts 26:22-23). Paul probably went into more detail here, quoting from Scriptures like Gen 22, Ps 16 & 22, & Is 53, all of which prophesied of Messiah's death & resurrection centuries before these things took place. Paul is clearly stating the resurrection of Jesus Christ was an historical fact. A rumbling of surprised disbelief must have gone through the people in the crowd as Paul related Jesus' words. They believed Jesus to be dead & His disciples had stolen His body to fake His resurrection. How then could Paul claim to have spoken with Him? Such a miracle is possible because God exists. It's proved by eyewitness testimony & by the changed lives of the witnesses. It's supported by the Hebrew Scriptures. But, so what? What difference should this fact make?

2. Repentance & Turning to God is the Only Proper Response to Jesus' resurrection. Paul shows this both by his own example & by his preaching. When Paul believed in Jesus, there was a 180-degree

turnaround of his life. From then on he preached that all people **should repent & turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance** (Acts 26:20). Repentance involves a change of mind, but it's more than only a change of mind. It involves a turning of the whole person, including a change of behavior. Repentance isn't separate from saving faith but a necessary part of genuine faith. If you truly believe that a prescription medicine will cure you, you don't just set it on the shelf. You take the pill. If you truly believe that Jesus is the risen Savior, you turn to God from your sins. Paul here says 4 things about repentance:

A. Repentance involves a change of understanding: from darkness to light. The risen Christ was the 1st to proclaim light (26:23). God sent Paul **to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light** (26:18). Apart from Jesus, all people, no matter how brilliant, are **darkened in their understanding** (Eph 4:18). As Jesus said, they **loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil** (Jn 3:19). Paul said that **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ** (2 Cor 4:4). People in this naturally fallen condition of darkness cannot see the blazing light of God's holiness. But the Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to open the eyes of the spiritually blind (Jn 16:8-11). If you'd asked Paul before his conversion whether he believed God is holy, there's no doubt he'd have answered, *Of course!* He knew that fact intellectually. But only when the light from heaven blinded him did Paul realize that God was far more holy than he'd ever imagined. The instant the light of God's holiness struck him to the ground, Paul, like Isaiah, was undone. He realized his own good works were like filthy rags in God's sight (Is 6:5; 64:6). Suddenly, he saw he was far more sinful than he'd ever imagined. If you'd asked Paul before his conversion if he were a sinner, he would have replied, *Of course, all men are sinners.* But like the Pharisee in Jesus' story, he probably would have thought, *I'm glad that I'm not a really bad sinner! I tithe, I pray, I fast* (Lk 18:10-12). But when the light from heaven blinded him, Paul instantly realized he could never qualify for heaven by his good deeds. All of his supposed good deeds could never atone for his evil deeds. Previously, Paul thought his own good deeds as a Pharisee would qualify him for heaven (Phil 3:4-6). Years after his conversion, Paul wrote, **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost**

(1 Tim 1:15). He didn't say, *I was foremost*, but *I am foremost!* As CS Lewis pointed out, *When a man is getting better, he understands more & more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less & less.*⁵ Because of this, repentance isn't just a one-time experience at the moment of conversion. It's the ongoing practice of every believer who walks in God's holy light. If sin & Satan blind people so they can't see the light of God's truth regarding His holiness & their own sin, how can they change? The biblical answer is that only God can change them. As Paul said, **For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ** (2 Cor 4:6). God brings this change through the preaching of the gospel. Thus the risen Lord told Paul that through his preaching God would **open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light & from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins & an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me** (26:18). God not only opens the sinner's eyes to the light of His holiness & to the darkness of the sinner's sin, but also to the abundance of God's grace in Christ, who bore the penalty that we as sinners deserve. Since Paul, the foremost of sinners, found mercy at the cross, that same mercy is available to each of us if we will repent.

B. Repentance involves a change of masters: from Satan to God. Everyone by nature is born into this world as a captive in Satan's evil domain of darkness (Col 1:13; 2 Tim 2:26). As Charles Wesley put it, *Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin & nature's night.*⁶ Both Jesus & Paul describe our condition as being slaves of sin (Jn 8:34-35; Rom 6:17, 20). We all were held captive by Satan to do his will (2 Tim 2:26). How can anyone break free from so strong a master? Jesus said, **So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed** (Jn 8:36). Paul says that God **rescued us from the domain of darkness, & transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins** (Col 1:13-14). It is God alone can free us from slavery to sin & make us slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:17-23). Or, as Wesley put it, *Thine eye diffused a*

⁵ *Mere Christianity*, p 87

⁶ & *Can It Be?* #180 in our hymnal

quicken ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, & followed Thee. This means if you haven't experienced a definite change of masters, from Satan to God, from serving sin & self to serving the Lord Jesus, you need to examine yourself to see whether you've truly repented of your sins. Repentance means turning **from the dominion of Satan to God** (Acts 26:18).

C. Repentance involves a change of relationship: from condemnation to forgiveness & acceptance

as heirs. Paul continues, **that they may receive forgiveness of sins & an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me** (26:18). Before repentance, we were under God's just condemnation because of our sins (Jn 3:18, 36). But the instant we repent & believe in Christ, God grants us forgiveness. In Rom 4:7–8, Paul wrote, **Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, & whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.** Later in Romans he describes the complete forgiveness believers experience by asking rhetorically, **Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us** (Rom 8:33–34). The apostle John said simply, **I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake** (1 Jn 2:12). Not only are we forgiven but we are given all of the riches that are in Christ (Acts 20:32; Eph 1:11, 14, 18; Col 1:12; 3:24; Heb 9:15). Peter described that inheritance as one that is **imperishable & undefiled & will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you** (1 Pt 1:4). That inheritance is the riches of eternal heaven. If you've turned from your sins & trusted in Jesus, you now enjoy God's forgiveness & every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:3-8). The clear teaching of Scripture is that salvation & forgiveness comes to a person only by faith in Jesus Christ apart from any human works (Jn 3:14–17; 6:69; Acts 13:39; 15:9; 16:31; Rom 3:21–28; 4:5; 5:1; 9:30; 10:9–11; Gal 2:16; 3:11, 24; Phil 3:9). Writing to the Ephesians, Paul stated that truth clearly, **For by grace you have been saved through faith; & that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast** (Eph 2:8–9). Thus repentance involves a change of understanding, from darkness

to light; a change of masters, from Satan to God; a change of relationship, from condemnation to forgiveness & acceptance as heirs. Finally...

D. Repentance involves a change of behavior: from sin to deeds appropriate to repentance. In Acts 26:20, Paul reports his obedience to this heavenly vision in that he kept declaring both to Jews & Gentiles, **that they should repent & turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.** Whether you've been a religious person (as Paul & the Jews were) or an unbelieving pagan (as the Gentiles were), the message is the same: Repent & turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. The deeds follow repentance. It's been put like this, *None more firmly than Paul rejected works, before or after conversion, as a ground of salvation; none more firmly demanded good works as a consequence of salvation.*⁷ Biblical repentance isn't just a change of mind or an intellectual decision. It's a turning of the whole person from sin to God, resulting in a life of obedience to God (Rom 6:17). Everywhere Paul preached, his message was the same: people should repent & turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. **Repentance** involves a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. Paul's additional use of the word **turn**, which often describes sinners turning to God (Lk 1:16–17; Acts 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 2 Cor 3:16; 1 Thes 1:9; 1 Pt 2:25), reinforces that meaning. Those who truly repent & turn to God will perform deeds appropriate to repentance (Mt 3:8; 7:16, 20; Js 2:18).

The story continues in vs 26, where Paul called Agrippa as a witness to his sanity, since the Jews believed in resurrection, & the things of which he'd spoken concerning the death of Jesus, & the claim of the Christians that He rose from the dead, all this was common knowledge in Israel. By remaining silent, Agrippa confirmed the truth of what Paul said. Paul then boldly addresses Agrippa directly, **King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets?** (Acts 26:27). The implication was that if he did, he'd have to concede that Jesus was the Messiah. Before Agrippa could respond, Paul answered his own question, **I know that you do.** Yes, Agrippa believed the prophets intellectually, just as many Americans *believe in Jesus* intellectually. But it made no difference in the way he lived. But Paul wasn't just preaching for intellectual agreement. He was preaching for repentance.

⁷ GH Lang, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p 493

Repentance means you believe in the risen Savior with such conviction that it turns around the way you live. Instead of living in darkness, you now live in the light of God's holy presence. Instead of living under Satan's domain, you now live under the Lordship of Jesus in line with His Word. Instead of living for yourself & your pleasures, you now live to please Jesus Christ. Paul had Agrippa cornered. If he denied his belief in the Prophets, he'd lose face with the Jews. If he agreed with Paul, he could see the next question would be, *Why don't you believe in Jesus Christ as the risen Savior?* He wasn't ready to go there! So he slipped out of this dilemma with a mildly sarcastic dodge, **In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.** The ESV translates it as a question, **In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?** & so to save face in front of this pompous crowd, Agrippa threw away his opportunity to receive God's forgiveness & gift of eternal life! Don't follow his example! Paul's response was gracious & dignified: **I would to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains** (26:29). No matter how long it took, it was Paul's desire that all who heard him would come to know Jesus. The scene is again one of startling incongruity. A lowly prisoner in chains tells the gathered political & military leaders & other important figures that he wishes they could be like him. Their fading, fleeting treasure was here on earth; Paul had **an unfailling treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys** (Lk 12:33).

With this the inquiry ended. Agrippa arose, along with the governor, Bernice, & their advisers. After they'd drawn aside, they began talking to one another about Paul's case. Whatever their view of Paul's sanity, they all agreed he wasn't doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment, yet they lacked the courage to release him.

I'm guessing we all believe that seat belts save lives. But that belief doesn't do you any good in a crash unless you actually have your seat belt fastened. Those who buckle up are those who truly believe that seat belts save lives. Your belief is worthless if you don't personally apply it. In the exact same way, who do you say that Jesus is? Do you believe that He is risen from the dead? Good for you! You're right to do so because it's true! But if that belief hasn't led you to truly trust in Christ for forgiveness of your sins & you aren't repenting of your sin, it won't do you any good

when you stand before God. Our response to the fact of Jesus' resurrection should be one of belief & repentance. If you haven't yet done this, today is the day. If you have the risen, living Christ as your Savior & Lord, you have the forgiveness He gives & are adopted into His family. **But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name** (Jn 1:12). Jesus offers you all of that & much more. This morning, I urge you be reconciled to God. Receive as a free gift His forgiveness & His righteousness credited to your account. Easter will be meaningless apart from your believing that Jesus rose from the dead, & confessing Him as Lord. Do you hear the cry in your heart, *What shall I do?* The answer is simply to repent & believe. Let's pray.