

**Sept 8<sup>th</sup> 2013: The Jesus The World Sees #11 "The Resurrection"**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

John Dickson in his book *Jesus A Short Life*, begins his chapter about the resurrection with a statement about Jesus that might well surprise some of us. He writes: ***"If we were transported back in time to Jerusalem in AD29, we would quickly discover that Jesus of Nazareth was not the most revered religious figure of that period."*** In fact he goes on to say that despite the crowds that flocked to hear Jesus speak and to see His miracles, there would have been at least three other religious figures that lived during Jesus' lifetime who were far more famous.

One such figure was a man called **Honi the Circle-drawer** who died around 65BC. Evidently he got that nick-name after praying for rain during a drought. He drew a circle around himself and told God that he would not leave the spot until rain fell, and apparently it soon did. Later on Honi became a martyr when he died rather than curse his people. The point Dickson makes, and I think it's a very good one, is that today the name of Honi the circle drawer is virtually unknown, yet the name of Jesus is recognized and venerated by untold millions throughout the world.

Something amazing must have happened to this man Jesus that has happened to no other man since, for Him to be remembered and worshipped for so many centuries, and something amazing did. He predicted that He would die upon a cross and then rise from the dead and it happened, exactly as He said it would.

The physical resurrection of Jesus and His ascension into glory where He exists today as God the Son and coming King, is the key doctrine of our Faith. Without the resurrection Jesus would have been exposed as a fraud and soon forgotten. Without the resurrection His death upon a cross would have achieved nothing. Without the resurrection we would all be facing all the horrible things that await rebels against the Creator God when we die.

But thankfully the resurrection did happen. That is our strong belief as Christians. Paul says in 1 Cor 15:20

***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.***

It is however still our belief, implanted in our hearts by God the Holy Spirit, and consequently there may be others who at times will question that belief. And we must know how to answer them in a way that may not convince them, but at the very least will give them something to ponder, for there are facts that support, at the very least, the likelihood of the resurrection.

**The first of these is the testimony of secular historians.** That they would research and publish on this matter is in itself a sign of its validity. We need to know says Dickson, 'that the resurrection remains a serious topic of academic historical investigation still, and it is not confined to religious historians and institutions.' He then names many prominent historians who are non-believers but who have led the way in researching the resurrection and summarize their findings in this way:-

***"All of these scholars agree that there is an irreducible historical core to the resurrection story that cannot be explained away as pious legend or wholesale deceit. Professor Sanders, who warms a seat at the skeptical end of mainstream scholarship states plainly: 'That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.' This is typical of the secular study of Jesus: something very strange happened; we just don't know what!"***

**The Second is the existence of eyewitnesses to the resurrection.** The secular historian will often express doubts about what these people actually saw, but they can only do so from their personal assumption that the resurrection was impossible. What they do not doubt however is that there were people who claimed that they had seen the risen Christ. Dickson quotes Professor James Dunn of Durham University who writes:

***"What we should recognize as beyond reasonable doubt is that the first believers experienced 'resurrection appearances' and that those experiences are enshrined, as with the earlier impact made by Jesus' teachings and actions, in the traditions which have come down to us."***

This is strongly supported of course by the New Testament record, and especially by the Bible reading that we had today from 1 Corinthians 15. In it Paul quotes an early creed of the New Testament church that most see as dating back to a few years after the resurrection and which mentions as

eyewitnesses people who were still living at the time. This passage shows that belief in the resurrection was not just a legend that built up over time. It was a documented account that circulated soon after the occurrence and could be verified by the people who were there. Look again at v3-8(CEV)

***<sup>3</sup> I told you the most important part of the message exactly as it was told to me. That part is:***

***Christ died for our sins,  
as the Scriptures say.***

***<sup>4</sup> He was buried,  
and three days later  
he was raised to life,  
as the Scriptures say.***

***<sup>5</sup> Christ appeared to Peter,  
then to the twelve.***

***<sup>6</sup> After this, he appeared  
to more than five hundred  
other followers.***

***Most of them are still alive,  
but some have died.***

***<sup>7</sup> He also appeared to James,  
and then to all  
of the apostles.***

***<sup>8</sup> Finally, he appeared to me, even though I am like someone who was born at the wrong time.***

This early statement of the church listed 5 separate witnesses or groups of witnesses:

Peter

The twelve

More than 500 hundred other followers

James the brother of Jesus and head of the church in Jerusalem

All the Apostles, being a larger group of missionaries than just the 12

To which Paul then adds his own name. An imposing list indeed.

**The Third is the Witness of the Women:** We know from all the Gospels that the very first people that the risen Lord appeared to were all women, and not prominent women at that. Now in our society that would not matter at all, but in Jewish society then, a women's testimony did not count for anything. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian wrote:

***"From women let no evidence be accepted because of the levity and temerity of their sex."***

So on this matter of the prominence that the Bible gives to the women's testimony Dickson states:

***"Put simply, if you were making up a story about a resurrection and you wanted your fellow first-century Jews to believe it, you would not include women as the initial witnesses, unless it happened embarrassingly to be the case."***

**The fourth fact which cannot be denied is The transformation of His Followers**

At the time of His death His followers went into hiding. They were associates of one who had been crucified by the authorities for treason. They were known to be part of His inner circle. Their lives were in danger and they knew it. So they shut themselves away behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, and no doubt made plans to escape from Jerusalem as soon as possible.

Then the resurrection occurred and any plans to leave Jerusalem were shelved. 40 days later these same men and others boldly and powerfully stood in Jerusalem and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus, empowered by an inner force that they had seen fall upon each other.

Overnight thousands became followers of this Jesus that had been crucified because they believed that He had risen from the dead and ascended into glory. Suddenly these followers stood before the authorities without fear proclaiming their belief in the resurrection and suffered and died rather than say that it wasn't true.

But surely the most powerful transformational evidence for the resurrection is seen in the life of Saul of Tarsus. This prominent Pharisee was so against Jesus that he willingly stood as witness to the stoning of Stephen. A stoning that was brought about when Stephen was shown by God His glory and the glory of the risen Jesus standing at His right hand. And Stephen cried out:

***"Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."***

And then, in confirmation that it was the risen Jesus whom he saw, he cried out as they stoned him, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

He testified to the resurrection and they stoned him to death for doing so. And the Bible said that Saul gave his approval to that appalling act.

From that moment on Saul became a machine of destruction as far as the followers of Christ were concerned. He intended to wipe out the movement that suggested the impossible. That Jesus had risen and therefore proves Himself to be God.

And then He himself met Jesus on the Damascus Road. Nothing less can ever explain the absolute and total turn around that caused him to be the greatest ambassador this world has ever seen for Jesus the Messiah, and for the truth of the resurrection.

Paul, as he is known, does not stand alone when it comes to stories of incredible transformation brought about in a person's life because they came to belief in Jesus.

Jesus said once of Himself, "I am the resurrection and the Life", and He proved it totally by rising from the dead.

There are many other things that we could point to that support our belief in the resurrection of Jesus, but in the final conclusion I feel, the most powerful fact that we can speak of is the meaning of the resurrection for us personally.

If you count yourself a Christian this morning then you should be ready to tell others what the resurrection of Jesus means for you, and I would challenge you to do what I sat down and did last week. To write down on a slip of paper at least three major things that Christ resurrected has meant for your life and then put it in your Bible. I don't intend to tell you what I wrote, even though I'm certain it would be similar to what you would write, because you need to work this out for yourself. But I believe that the Holy Spirit will use your testimony more than anything else to touch a heart with the reality of Christ's resurrection for them, and the need they have to accept Him as their risen Saviour.

Finally I want to leave you with an illustration that will start you thinking about what you will write. Written by a man called A Lamb it tells how:

***In the midst of a storm, a little bird was clinging to the limb of a tree, seemingly calm and unafraid. As the wind tore at the limbs of the tree, the bird continued to look the storm in the face, as if to say, "Shake me off; I still have wings." Because of Christ's resurrection, each Christian can look the experience of death in the face and confidently say, "Shake me off: I still have wings. I'll live anyway."***