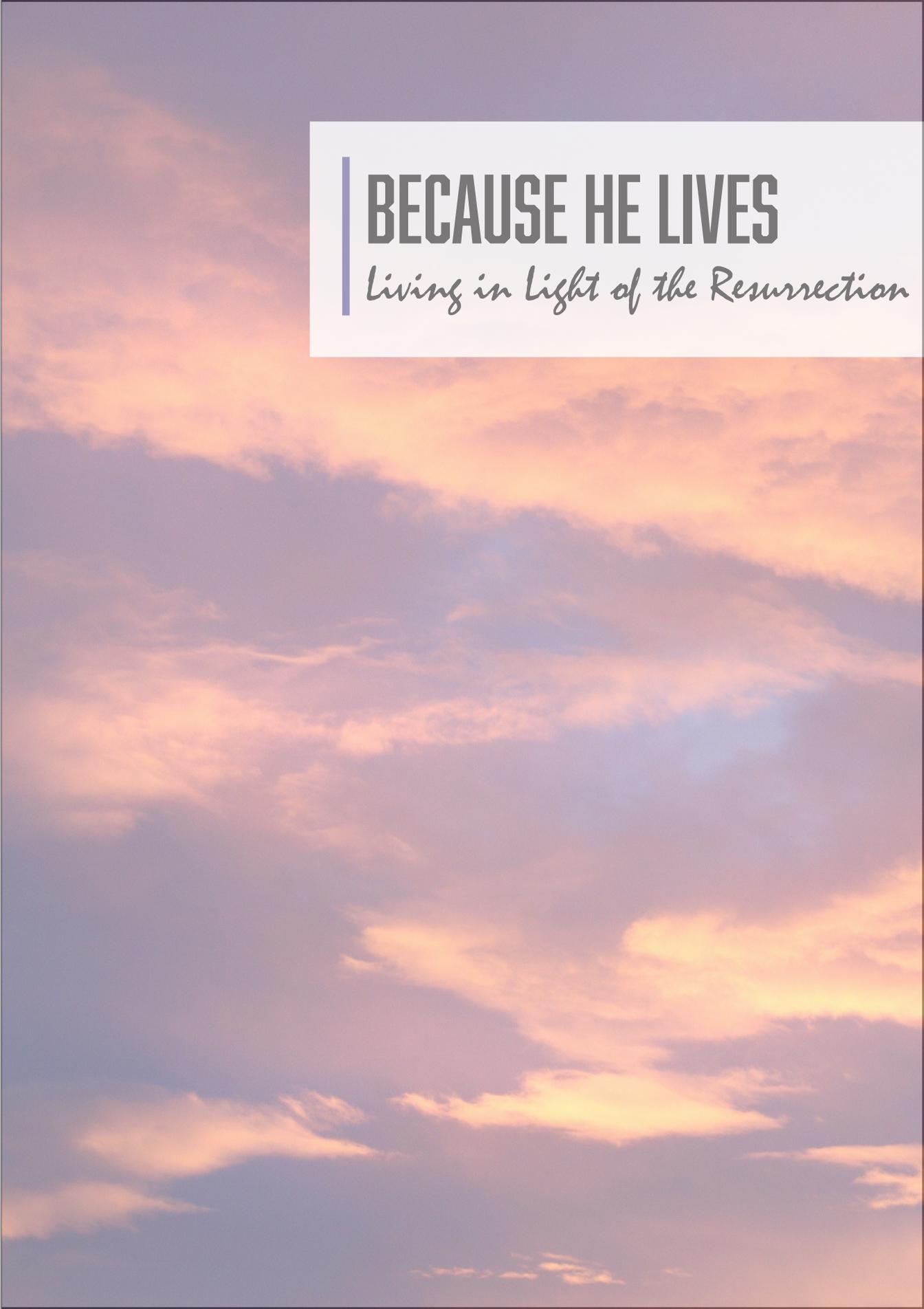


BECAUSE HE LIVES

Living in Light of the Resurrection

By Dr. Steven Jones & Claire Mummert



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Living in Light of the Resurrection

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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Lesson 1 | **Because He Lives: *Everything is Changed***

1 Cor. 15:1-8

by Steve Jones

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is central to everything Christians believe. But Easter isn't about the Cross. Easter is about the Empty Tomb. Christianity isn't just about what happened on Good Friday. It's about what happened on Easter Sunday. For some reason, though, Good Friday always creeps in on Easter Sunday. It is true that no discussion of the Resurrection is complete without first considering why Jesus died. But in many churches on most Easters, Christians are talking about what Jesus did on Good Friday rather than about what He did on Easter Sunday. Perhaps it's because we are attempting to use Easter as an evangelism tool for people who don't come every week and so talking about the need for someone else to pay for our sins fits the agenda for the day. Perhaps it's because we have thought more about the cross and so talking about sin and death and paying penalties is easier than grappling with the full significance of the resurrection. Perhaps it's just that a cross fits better in a stained-glass window, or a necklace, or a bible cover than an empty tomb does. Whatever the reason, we as Christians need to think deeply about the transforming reality of Easter. Early Jewish Christians were so moved by the events of Easter that they moved the day of worship from the traditional Jewish Sabbath, which is on our Saturday, not to Friday when Jesus died for our sins, but to Sunday, the day He rose again. Every Sunday when Christians come together, we are gathering to celebrate a little Easter. It is important that we contemplate how the events of Easter stand at the center of everything we believe.

Each Gospel ends with an account of the resurrection of Jesus. But when you are looking to understand all the implications of what the resurrection means, probably the best passage of Scripture to start with is 1 Corinthians 15, in which Paul presents the Church in Corinth a defense of the historicity of the Resurrection. Paul starts this chapter not by saying that the resurrection is one part of what Christians believe. He begins by saying that the resurrection is the very center of the gospel that he preaches.

1 Corinthians 15:1-2 says, “¹ Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.”

The Christian claim has always been that Jesus Christ rose from the dead physically as a historical event. Paul, in this passage, states the evidence for believing the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event. In verses 3-8, there are 4 clauses which begin with “that.” Each of these phrases present key evidence in defense of the resurrection. Today we are going to look closely at each claim and see what the alternatives are. The goal is to realize that no matter how unlikely or unexpected, the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the best explanation of all the facts. As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has his famous crime-solver Sherlock Holmes say repeatedly through his books: “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

Jesus was killed (v3b)

“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”

The death of Jesus on the cross paid for our sins. That fact is central to everything Christians believe about what God is doing in the world. We say the “for our sins” so much that we forget that this phrase contains an important piece of evidence for the resurrection. Jesus was really dead. Before we talk about whether He was seen alive on Easter, it is important to underscore the fact that Jesus actually died on the cross.

The reason this is important is because of a modern theory attempting to disprove the resurrection, called the **Resuscitation Theory**, sometimes also called the **Swoon Theory**. No one in antiquity believed or even considered it. It began in the 18th century among the rationalists. This theory suggests that Jesus did not in fact die on the cross. He appeared dead but had simply swooned or slipped into a deep coma. The Jews, not possessing our superior medical and scientific knowledge, mistook him for dead and buried him. The coolness of the tomb revived Jesus. He then emerged from the tomb and appeared to his disciples who mistakenly assumed he had risen from the dead.

The Problems with this alternative explanation are numerous. Consider what Jesus went through leading up to the crucifixion. He was exhausted, having been sleep deprived through the 3 Roman and 3 Jewish trials that He endured that night. He was scourged, or beat with the Roman flagrum, an instrument which itself had been known to cause death in its victims. He had nails driven through his hands and feet, and hung there for several hours. He was mistaken for dead by 4 Roman executioners who specialized in killing. He was wrapped in a tight burial shroud (through which he must have been able to breathe). He was placed in a tomb guarded by Roman soldiers.

It defies belief to think that Jesus then in the coolness of the tomb (coolness which according to medicine would have aided in killing him instead of healing him), awoke, unwrapped himself, moved the stone, snuck past the guards, then appeared to the disciples who mistook his bleeding and exhausted body as the risen Christ conqueror over the death and grave. Jesus died on the cross. He was killed by people who knew what they were doing. They didn't get it wrong.

Jesus was buried (v4a)
"that He was buried"

The next piece of evidence that Paul gives is that the dead body of Jesus was buried. All the Gospels assert that the body of Jesus was buried, and that the burial place was known to all parties involved. Again, it doesn't seem like it's worth noting, but it is. There are a couple of rival theories that people advance to undermine the resurrection focus on the trying to establish that the disciples didn't know where Jesus was buried.

The first is called the ***Unknown Tomb Theory***. It claims that the body of Jesus instead of being placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was thrown in a pit or paupers grave. It was therefore unmarked and unknown to the disciples. There was no tomb so how could it be empty? The problem with this argument is that it has no evidence to support it besides conjecture. It is a modern idea, which goes against what the Bible says about the burial of Jesus. Surely had Jesus been thrown into a pit some Jewish or Roman official would have known this and quickly exposed the belief in the empty tomb as fraudulent.

Another theory, called the **Wrong Tomb Theory**, states that the disciples got confused and went to the wrong tomb and Easter Sunday Morning. The New Testament says Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus while the disciples and women watched from a distance where Jesus was laid. So, when they went to find the tomb on Sunday, they went to the wrong one. They expected to find a closed tomb, but they found an open one. A young man guessed their errand and tried to tell them that they had made a mistake in the place, "He is not here. See the place where they laid him," and pointed to the next tomb. But the women were so frightened that they flee. While using the bible as evidence for the phrase "He is not here, behold the place where they laid him," this theory leaves out the phrase, which is included in every account (Matthew 28:6, Mark 16:6, Luke 24:6): "He is risen."

The main problem with both these alternative theories is that, were they true, the body of Jesus would be easily locatable. So, when Jesus's disciples claimed He was risen, all the Sanhedrin or Roman officials need to do is go to the actual tomb and get the body of Jesus, which was still lying there. As New Testament Scholar John Warwick Montgomery once wrote, "It passes the bounds of credibility that the early Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those whom might easily refute it simply by producing the body of Jesus."

Jesus was raised (v4b)

"that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"

Paul goes on to say that Jesus was raised on the third day. This statement has in it an implied addition piece of information: the tomb was empty. The clue is the phrase "on the third day." How would the disciples know that Jesus had risen or when unless they also knew that He wasn't where he was supposed to be. Every culture, even the Bible, has stories about ghosts and spirits. No one ever confuses them with the resurrection of the person. If the disciples had seen Jesus after the crucifixion without knowing the tomb was empty, they would think they had seen a ghost, or spirit, or angel. So, when Paul says, "on the third day," what He means is that people went to where His body was supposed to be, and it wasn't there.

This is important because there is an alternative theory called the ***Spiritual Resurrection Theory*** that believes that it doesn't matter if the tomb was empty. The body of Jesus rotted in the tomb, but that the real resurrection was a spiritual resurrection. The Problem is that the Bible goes to great length to emphasize both that the tomb really was empty, and that Jesus really was bodily physically raised from the dead. In Luke 24:39, the Risen Jesus says to his disciples, "See My hands and My feet, that is it I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Later, in Luke 24:41-43, Jesus asks for something to eat. They give him piece of fish and he eats it. This theory disregards that Christianity claims a bodily resurrection of Jesus, that his tomb was empty and that it really did matter. If Jesus had only been resurrected "spiritually", when his disciples claimed that the tomb was empty, once again the Jews or Romans could have easily produced the body to prove otherwise.

The empty tomb is the central fact of this event. People have tried in vain to find alternative explanations. The most common one is simply that the body was stolen. Probably the most prominent of the empty tomb theories is that the ***Disciples Stole the Body***. In fact, it was the one the Jewish Authorities are credited with starting. Matthew 28:11-13 says that the guards reported this all to the chief priests who then paid them off and instructed them to say that the disciples stole the body while they were asleep. There are several problems with this explanation.

First, if the guards were asleep, how could they have seen who took the body? Second, would the Disciples have risked it? Given the already demonstrated cowardice of the disciples (they all fled Jesus when he was arrested), is it reasonable to assume that they would have attempted to steal Jesus from a tomb guarded by Armed Roman Soldiers, asleep or not? Third, could the guards have slept through the stone being rolled away? A stone was rolled in front of the tomb and then a seal was place on it. To get to the body the disciples would have had to tiptoe past the soldiers, break the seal, roll the stone away, then carry the body back past trained Roman soldiers who slept through the whole thing. Fourth, what did the disciples have to gain?

Jesus cost them their lives. They had left everything for him. They had no gain from creating and perpetuating this lie. All but one disciple, John, died a violent death for his faith. Why would people who had concocted a story all die for something which they had invented, and which profited them nothing?

Some think that **The Authorities Stole the Body**. This theory alleges that the Roman or Jewish authorities moved the body and put it in a safe place so that the disciples could not perpetuate any deception. The main problem with this theory is if the Jews or Romans had the body why did they not produce it, when the disciples started making resurrection claims.

Jesus was seen (v5-8)

“that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, after that...”

At the time Paul wrote this letter, many of those people were still alive and could be consulted as to the veracity of their claims. Paul doesn't say, “Look within your heart and see if you see Jesus.” He says, “Go talk to the hundreds of people still alive who saw him alive.” Though we may not be able to consult those same eyewitnesses to the resurrection, it is important to realize that Christianity started by claiming this fact at a time when eyewitnesses could be consulted. There is some evidence available to us that vouches for the truth of the eyewitness testimony: the changed lives of the disciples. Read the gospels, the disciples misunderstand Jesus, they get confused, they get scared. Then something happens that transforms them from a band of cowardly, confused, misfits into a group of people that turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The Christian answer is the one Paul gives here; these disciples were transformed because they saw Jesus alive after He had been brutally murdered.

Some have tried to explain away these appearances. One of the most common alternate explanation is the **Hallucinations Theory**, that claims the disciples only imagined that they saw the risen Lord. All Jesus's appearances were simply imagined. There are a couple problems with this theory. First, Psychologists tell us that only particular kinds of people experience hallucinations, people suffering from paranoia or schizophrenia. Second, hallucinations are rooted in the mind of the individual experiencing them. It is extremely unlikely that

more than one or two people could experience the same hallucination. The Bible claims that he appeared to groups of people. Third, Hallucinations require expectation. You usually have to expect what you hallucinate. Your mind cannot simply create what it doesn't have. But the last thing the disciples expected was the resurrection. Mary came to the tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning with spices in her hands to anoint the dead body of Jesus. She was expecting to find a corpse. The last thing she expected was to find him risen from the dead.

Another popular modern theory is the **Legend Theory**. This is the belief that the resurrection accounts are mere legends that grew up after the fact. Though historical events do sometimes change and grow into myth, it takes several generations for this to happen. The process can't even start until after eyewitnesses to the events in question are no longer available to confirm the details. In this passage Paul makes specific reference to eyewitnesses (as many as 500) who are still alive and can verify the truth of what he is saying. If it were possible to date the Gospels to 200 or 300 years after the event, the theory might be plausible. But the gospels were all written by the first generation of Christians, all of whom saw Jesus. They presented his life not as legend but as fact which rests on history and could be supported with evidence.

The disciples claimed to have seen Jesus alive again three days after being murdered. That experience changed them in a profound way. As New Testament scholar J.N.D. Anderson wrote, the appearances of Jesus transformed the disciplines from "dejected and dispirited escapists into witnesses whom no opposition could muzzle." Their changed lives and willingness to suffer for their faith serves as confirmation of the validity of their experience.

As popular historian Will Durant once wrote, "That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so loft an ethic, and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the gospels."

Is there really any other theory which explains the facts of the Death, Burial, Empty Tomb, and Appearances of Jesus better than the claim that He is Risen? The Disciples realized it was the only explanation. They weren't expecting it. They didn't understand it. But they spent the rest of their lives reorienting their lives around it. So should we.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the resurrection of Jesus the central event in Christianity? What are some ways we don't always make the resurrection the center? How can we be better about focusing on it?
2. Why do some people deny that Jesus died on the cross? What is wrong with this explanation of events?
3. Why does Paul emphasize the fact that Jesus was buried? What other explanations do people give?
4. How does "He was raised on the third day" imply the fact of the empty tomb? How do people try to explain away the empty tomb?
5. What do the appearances of Jesus prove? How would you answer someone who said they either hallucinated the appearances or else made them up?

Lesson 2 | Because He Lives: *Death is Not the End*

1 Thess. 4:13-18

by Steve Jones

Jesus was an alien. Don't believe me? Read John 18:39: "Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Of course, it's not true. It's just an easy example of what happens when we take verses out of their context and make them try to prove something they were never meant to prove. Sadly, this happens quiet frequently with various Bible passages, most of them with less comical results. We take the wrong meaning from a particular piece of information, or emphasize the wrong thing, or take something out of context and end up missing the point completely.

Today's passage is one of those pieces of Scripture. If you google the scripture reference for today's study, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the vast majority of website you will find focus on End Times Prophecy, specifically the "Rapture." Though this passage does mention the return of Jesus, the main point is something else. This passage is meant to be one of hope, comfort, and encouragement. Paul is writing to a church that is dealing with the death of its members. They are new believers and are wondering how their new faith deals with death. Paul writes these words so that as verse 13 says, they won't "grieve as the rest do, who have no hope." He concludes this section in verse 18 by saying "Comfort one another with these words."

Paul will talk about the return of Jesus. But he does so in the context of a larger discussion about how the Resurrection of Jesus gives us proof that death is not the end. It is the resurrection that is the center of Paul's discussion. He shows us how we can learn to grieve with hope because of what the resurrection guarantees.

The Problem of Death (v13)

“about those who have fallen asleep...”

According to most New Testament scholars, 1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest books in the New Testament to be written, if not the absolute first (also in the running are James and Galatians, in case you were interested). Because it is so early, people were having questions about how this new faith worked. One of them revolved around the question of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. They knew Jesus had promised to return and reign over a restored creation. Many early Christians believed that it would happen very soon. So, the Thessalonians were worried about their loved who died before Jesus returned. Would they miss the reign of Jesus? This led to a greater worry, or perhaps just ignorance about what happened to people when they died. So, Paul takes this opportunity to educate them, to give them truth that they can hold on to when they experience loss.

Though we might not have the same questions the Thessalonians have, this passage is still an important passage for dealing with questions about what happens to individuals when they die and what is God's plan for finishing the work that began at the cross and empty tomb.

The Proof of the Resurrection (v14)

“if we believe that Jesus died and rose again...”

Paul centers his arguments around the resurrection of Jesus. He says in verse 14, “if we believe that Jesus died and rose again,” which means that everything else Paul is about to say hinges on the truth of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is more than just an amazing singular historical event. It is proof that Jesus is who He said He is.

And just who did He say he is? In John 11, Jesus confronts Mary and Martha, two of his followers heartbroken over the death of their brother, Lazarus. He meets Martha at the tomb and tells her, “Your brother will rise again. (v23)” Martha thought Jesus was giving her a theology lesson and responds with, ““I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. (v24)” That is when Jesus speaks one of his most famous sayings about himself. In John 11:25-26 He replies to Martha, “25 I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,

26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”

Jesus doesn't just offer resurrection to the dead and life to the living. He IS resurrection and life. Life flows from the person of Jesus. And because life flows from him, those who are near him have life as well.

When Jesus talks about death, he doesn't mean that believers will not die physically. If that were the case, his words would have been patently false. He spoke these words standing just feet away from the dead body of his friend Lazarus. He means that the death of our physical body doesn't end our existence. He is telling Martha, and us, that death of the body does not mean death of the self. He who believes in me IS STILL ALIVE even if HIS BODY is dead.

In all of this, he wants his followers to believe that He has power over death. And for those who believe in Him, death has lost its power.

In Thessalonians, Paul goes on to show the promises that flow to us from the power of Jesus's resurrection.

The Promise of Rest (v14b)

“those who have fallen asleep in Jesus”

The first promise that the Resurrection of Jesus offers to Christians is rest. Paul intentionally uses the phrase, “fallen asleep” to describe those who have died. Jesus does the same thing in John 11. He told his disciples in John 11:4 that Lazarus's sickness wouldn't end in death. It means that though Lazarus's body had died, he was still alive. He confirms it again in John 11:11, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.”

Death to the follower of Jesus has become simply sleep because Jesus has defeated death. In Revelation 1:17-18 Jesus says, ¹⁷ “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

Let that last phrase sink in. Because of his resurrection, Jesus has the keys of death and hades.

In Acts 2:24, during his Pentecost Sermon, Peter says, “God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” Jesus's death paid for our sins. Jesus's

resurrection took the agony out of death.

In place of agony, we are offered rest. Revelation 14:13 says, "And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul writes, "To be absent from the body" means "to be present with the Lord." In Luke 23:34, Jesus himself told the repentant thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Here in 1 Thessalonians 4:14b, Paul writes, "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." Those who have died are not lost, God has them. They are resting. God will bring them with Him when He returns.

The Promise of Resurrection (v15-16)

"the dead in Christ will rise ..."

Resting with God after we die isn't the final hope for followers of Jesus. The ultimate hope is resurrection. Like Marth told Jesus about her brother Lazarus, you and I will also "rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

This is a part of the promises of Christ that many forget. For some reason, we narrow our hope to simply "going to be with Jesus when we die." That is all true, but it is not our final destiny. We will be like Christ. Raised from the dead. This gets a little tricky but look closely at verses 14 and 17 and ask yourself where the dead in Christ are. In verse 14, it says that "God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep," so they are with God. Verse 17 says that "the dead in Christ will rise," so that means the dead are still in the ground. What's the answer? The answer is Resurrection, which is more than just spiritual existence. It's being raised to the same life that Jesus had when He was raised.

One day, our bodies will be raised from the dead, like Christ. And those who are alive at Christ's return will have to be transformed from corruptible flesh to incorruptible. That is why Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:51, "we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed." When that

happens, perishable flesh that breaks, decays, and wears out will be replaced not with a ghostly body but with a new type of physical body, one that doesn't decay, one that isn't corruptible, one like Jesus has.

The Promise of Restoration (v16-17)

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven..."

There is a third promise contained in these verses: The return of Jesus. When He returns, He will renew His creation and repair all the damage sin has done and restore it to the way He always intended. This is another aspect of the return of Christ that we miss. We sometimes think that Jesus is going to come back and rescue his people and leave this sinful world to burn. But the Christian hope is the restoration of all things.

Part of the confusion comes from a misunderstanding of a key phrase. In verse 17, it says that we who are live at Christs return, "will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Many people interpret this to mean that we are leaving with Jesus. But this passage doesn't talk about Jesus leaving. It talks about Jesus coming to reclaim the world that He made. So why does "meeting the Lord in the air" mean? The picture is one of Royal welcome and escort. In Ancient Times, when an honored guest was coming to visit, important people of the town would go out to meet the person and escort them in. This happens to Paul when He goes to Rome. Acts 28:15 says, "15And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us." The elders of the church at Rome went three towns out to meet Paul and welcome him into the city. That is what Paul says we will do for Jesus when He returns. We will meet Him, join His heavenly entourage and welcome Him into the world He is reclaiming.

You see, when Christ returns, He will undo all the damage done by sin. Not just in our lives, but in all creation. Romans 8:19-21 says that "all creation groans" under the weight of our sin and longs to "be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Perhaps this is part of the Christian story you have not heard very much about. God created this world. He loves it. He promises to restore it. In Revelation 21:1-5, John says, 'Then I saw a

new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

Notice that God doesn't say, "I will make all new things." He promises to make all things new. He promises to undo the damage done by sin. He promises that He will wipe away every tear from every eye. He promises to destroy death, mourning, crying, and pain.

There is not a single place where sin currently claims a victory that will be allowed to stand. We will rest. We will rise. We will be restored along with all of God's creation. You could see why Paul would conclude the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4 by saying, "comfort one another with these words."

Discussion Questions

1. What questions do people have about death? How does the resurrection provide answers and hope? What does it mean that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?
2. What is the promise of rest offered by the resurrection? What happens to us when we die? What does it mean that people who have died are frequently mentioned as having "fallen asleep?"
3. How do we sometimes forget about our own resurrection? Why is "going to be with Jesus where I die" not my final destiny? What does it mean that we have the Promise of resurrection?
4. Why is Christ returning? What does scripture say about our promise of restoration? What do Romans 8:19-21, James 1:18, and Revelation 21:1-5 mean in this context?
5. In the famous passage about "being caught up with him in the air," what is Jesus in the act of doing? What does rising to meet Jesus represent? How was this played out in the life of Paul in Acts 28?

Lesson 3 | Because He Lives: We See God Clearly

Acts 17:22-34

by Steve Jones

If God is real, why are there so many different religions? At one time or another, many of us have had this thought. Sometimes it gets expressed in the form of bad ideas like: Aren't all religions valid? Isn't the main thing to be sincere and consistent? Religions are just different paths up the same mountain to God. Either heard, or said, or thought these are honest, nice sounding bad ideas.

One of the reasons people aren't opened to discussing differences in belief is because it almost always centers on the question of "who is going to hell?" Many discussions between people with differing beliefs eventually boil down to one person saying, "So you think I'm going to hell?"

Often times, this is the fault of Christians. We frequently present the Gospel to people as making sure they have the right answer to a secret question otherwise God will send them to a terrible place. We need to realize that Hell is not an evangelism strategy. I am not trying to deny the existence of Hell. Jesus himself talked about Hell. He just never used Hell as a means of getting people to follow Him. To people whose lives were broken by sin, He offered forgiveness and life.

We need to think about religion as spiritual medicine. When doctors go to developing countries, they don't tell locals that all views of medicine are equally valid so they should keep doing what they are doing. Nor do they go to the other extreme the other extreme and threaten them with death unless they accept this new view of health. Doctors point out how their view of health is right, wrong, or incomplete and needs to be clarified. They do it not to shame, or bully, or control. They do it to bring life.

Christianity offers healing for diseased souls. We all have a bad picture of who God is. It comes from our honest but incomplete searching for God. And

it is causing us to think bad things and live in bad ways. And it produces death in your own life.

Today, we are going to look at a passage in Acts which describes Paul's visit to Athens. Paul walks around and sees the result of people living out the consequences of having an incomplete picture of who God is. He doesn't shame or bully or threaten them. He shows them how their picture of God needs to be brought into focus. The last words of Paul's speech are important. In verse 31, Paul concludes with, "having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead." The Resurrection is proof that if you want the clearest picture of who God is, you need to look at Jesus. Now let us look at what Paul says before this and how He brings our picture of God into focus.

God Made Us to Seek Him (v22-28)

The question of the hiddenness of God is a real one that many people have. It is sometimes expressed in other ways, like: If God is real how come I can't see Him? Or Why does God hide himself? Many people think they would have an easier time believing in God if they could only see Him.

The question of God's hiddenness is an important one. It's a great question to ask. One reason God hides is to give us freedom. Think back to the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 3, after Adam sins, God comes looking for Him and asks, "Where are You?" God gives us space to give us freedom. If God were tangibly present every minute of every day, we would perceive Him like a parent looking over our shoulder or a teacher proctoring an exam. In the space God gives us, we have real freedom. Freedom to sin like Adam did. But also, freedom to seek. God has left enough of Himself in the world to make belief in Him reasonable and rational. He has left enough of Himself out to allow sinful selfish people to go on about their business. God rewards seeking. God also leave room to avoid Him if you want. Ken Boa famously said, "There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who seek God and those who seek to avoid God, and both will be successful in the end."

The Bible is full of promises that God rewards seeking. In Jeremiah 29:13, God says through the prophet, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus said, "7 "Ask,

and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Paul says something similar to the people of Athens. He starts his evangelistic message by discussing this idea of seeking God.

Our Seeking is God given (v27) “that they would seek God” – Paul starts by saying that our desire to seek God is actually a God-given gift. After saying God made everyone and also determined where they would live, he says, that God determined “that they would seek God.” We were made to seek after God. We long for God. We have a God-shaped hole inside of us. We try to fill it with other things. But nothing works. As early Christian Pastor St. Augustine famously wrote talking to God, “You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Our Seeking Can Find Truth (v28) – “as even some of your own poets have said...” – Not only did God make us to seek after Him, we are capable of finding truth. There is a mistake that says if Christianity is true, all other religions must be completely false. Paul starts his speak in Athens with truths that the Athenians themselves have discovered. John 1:9 says, “There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” All truth is God’s truth. Anyone honestly seeking truth is inspired by God and a path that eventually leads to the one true God. As CS Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity, “If you are a Christian, you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through..., you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic – there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong; but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.”

Our Seeking is Broken by Sin v27b “if perhaps they might grope for Him...” – Based on what has been said so far it would be easy to think that our God-given ability to seek Him would be enough. But Paul goes on to tell us that our ability to seek is broken. In verse 27, when he is talking about how God made us to seek after Him, He says, “they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though

He is not far from each one of us.” The picture is one of a blind person in a cave groping in double darkness trying to find something that is incredibly close to Him. We have all had the experience of trying to find something in the dark and realizing that our sense of distance and space and memory are not what we thought they would be. Sometimes we are close and don’t know it. Sometimes we are incredibly far, and think we are close. Paul says that is the current state of our seeking. God-given but damaged and in need of assistance.

God Makes Himself Known in Nature (v24-29)

Because of sin, our search for God is misguided and incomplete. It either goes in a wrong direction or doesn’t go far enough. It was the idolatry of the Athenians that was breaking Paul’s heart. Acts 17:16 says, “while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.” So, when he begins his speech, Paul starts with the things they are getting wrong. But the evidence he uses are attributes of God that they themselves have discovered in order to show how even what they know about God contradicts the idolatry they are practicing. Too many times we try to argue with people using evidence they don’t accept. We say things like, “well the Bible says…” To which most people respond, “I don’t believe the Bible or accept it as an authority. What else you got?” Paul doesn’t start with Biblical revelation. He starts with natural revelation, what every man is capable of discovering about God. As Paul later wrote in Romans 1:19-20, “that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

God is creator (v24) “The God who made the world and all things in it…” – Psalm 19 begins with “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.” Most people have figured out by looking at the world that it needed a creator.

God is sustainer (v25) “He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things” – In addition to being a creator, Paul commends the

Athenians for realizing that God is also a sustainer. God isn't some cosmic clockmaker who spun the work into existence, got it going, then left it alone. The same power that brought the world into existence sustains the world and keeps it going. Paul says the same thing about Jesus in Colossians 1:17, "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

God is ruler (v26) "having determined their appointed times..." The third attribute of God that Paul says the Athenians got right was to realize that God is the ruler of the world. It might seem a simple restatement of the previous idea, but it's not. God is more than an impersonal force keeping the universe running like an engine. He is a personal agent actively involved in the management of the world He created.

God is father (v28) "For we also are His children" – The last attribute that the Athenian's figured out was that since we are all His children, that means God is a father. This is a profound realization. God is not just a distant creator, not just an impersonal sustainer, not just a powerful ruler, He is a personal and loving father. Those realizations set the stage for...

God Makes Himself Known In Jesus (v30-31)

Having sifted through all that the Athenians had figured out in their search for God, Paul now turns to what they couldn't discover on their own.

If you are lost in the dark, you might find a few things groping around, but what you really need is for someone to reveal to you where you are and where you need to go. That is precisely what Jesus came to be: the revelation to us of who God is and how we can find Him. In Verse 30 Paul says, "God is now declaring..." Jesus is God's clearest declaration of who He is. Paul says the same thing in Colossians 1:15 "He is the image of the invisible God." And again in Colossians 2:9, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form."

If you want the clearest picture of who God is, look at Jesus. And what does Jesus tell us about who God is? Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens ends in Acts 17:30-31 with Him saying: "30 all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has

appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” It is easy to read words like “repentance,” “judgement” and “righteousness” and think we are back in that old “fire and brimstone,” “every is going to hell but me” way of thinking. But that is not the case. We just need to unlearn some bad definitions we have for some important words.

Repentance – Sometimes we think that repentance means beating ourselves up for our past mistakes or doing things that prove that we are suitably sorry for what we have done. But that is not what repentance is. The Greek word literally means “to change your mind so that you change your behavior” It means to change your picture of who God is, to stop thinking about yourself, your sin, or God the way you have been and to starting seeing things correctly. When Paul says God is calling us to repent, it means that in order to change our lives, we must change how and what we think about. Ideas have consequences. Bad ideas lead to bad actions. Good ideas lead to life.

Judgement – Paul says God “has fixed a day when He will judge the world.” It’s so easy to hear judgement and think it means either punishment or condemnation. But look up judgement in a dictionary and you see that it can have a more benign meaning. It can mean simply “evaluation” or “examination.” A doctor diagnosing a patient is giving his judgement but not to condemn but to heal. Sometimes we think God is difficult and unreasonable, placing on us a standard He knows we can’t meet. But the Bible is full of constant reminders that God is well aware of our frailties. Psalm 103:14 says, “For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.” Hebrews 4:15 says, “we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses.” Here in Acts 17, Paul twice mentions the Athenians ignorance. God acknowledges and factors our weakness, limitations, and ignorance into His evaluation of us.

Righteousness – Paul says that God is going to judge the world in righteousness. That means He is going to evaluate or examine the world and righteousness is the means whereby He is going to do so. The place where Paul was standing was surrounded by Temples dedicated to a wide variety of gods, each one symbolizing a type of fulfillment: war, power, wealth, love, etc. Worshipers at each of these temples were asking for the god's favor in this one dimension of life. They believed

that if they could only gain victory, or wealth, or love, or power then they would find true fulfillment in life. Paul is telling the Athenians that Jesus is proof that the secret to finding fulfillment is through seeking righteousness. But even the word righteousness can convey notions of an unreachable standard. Again, Paul shows us that Jesus is the kind of righteousness that God uses as His judgement.

At the core of God's judgement of this world is the Cross and Empty Tomb. The cross is God's statement that He cares about righteousness, that it is essential to finding fulfillment and that you can't be righteousness on your own or do it for yourself. The Cross is proof that God did it for us. Now righteousness doesn't mean trying to be good enough. It means trying to get close to the source of righteousness.

Paul is telling the Athenians and us that we will find true fulfillment when we find the One, True, God. We have to change our picture of who God is. If we saw God for who He really is and what He is really doing in the universe, we would be able to live our lives in a way that would lead us to fulfillment. Paul's final word is that the resurrection is proof that the farther away you get from Jesus the cloudier and cloudier your picture of God gets. The cloudier your picture is, the less truth you have, and the worse your ability to live a life that brings fulfillment.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the real questions that keep people from following Jesus? How does disagreement among religions scare people away? How do many people respond to disagreement in other religions?
2. Why is sincerity and honesty not enough in our search for God or religious devotion?
3. What does it mean to search for God? What does Paul mean that our searching for God is God-given? What does it mean that our ability to search is broken by sin?
4. Why is the resurrection proof that Jesus is the clearest picture of who God is? What happens when our picture of God is out of focus?
5. How are the words “repentance,” “judgment,” and “righteousness” often misunderstood? What do they really mean? How is this revealed in Jesus?

Lesson 4 | Because He Lives: *We Share His Victory*

Rom. 6:5-14

by Claire Mummert

We all know what it's like to walk in someone else's footsteps. I am the youngest in my family and sometimes that comes with benefits and sometimes it comes with consequences. In school if I had to follow after my one sibling, I knew that my time in that class was doomed before it began. There was a trail of angry, frustrated teachers in their wake. However, another sibling was completely different. On my first day of English my junior year of high school, my English teacher began to take roll. She ticked off the names one at a time and when she read mine, her face lit up, she looked up at me and brightly proclaimed a name.

But it was not my name.

It was the name of my sibling who also happened to be perfect. Okay, maybe not perfect, but going through high school making high A's and earning the respect of every teacher felt perfect to me. I was a decent student, but I was not quite that good. Even though I never lived up to the standards of perfection set by my sibling, I had an easier time gaining the respect and praise of this teacher because I was associated. I did not earn that favor, I received it only by association.

When we associate our lives with Christ, when we become His followers, we sometimes face consequences in the form of rejection or suffering just because we follow Him. But we also receive positive consequences. We get forgiveness of sin and relationship with God the Father because of this association. We get treated as sons and daughter, as heirs. We receive life in Him because, once we have entered into relationship with God and have given Him control. **We are associated with Him forever.** We are being covered in Him and the way He lived rather than being treated in our own right. Today, we are going to look at a passage in Romans where Paul talks about this. In the book of Romans, Paul is concerned with showing you the freedom you have because of the work God did through His Son,

Jesus Christ. As part of that argument, in chapter six, Paul shows us the positive effects of being associated with Jesus. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). This changes us and our relationship with God in these three ways:

We share in His Life (vv. 5-9)

Romans 6:5 helps us to see a world where we can find freedom when we are united with the life of Christ. It says that, “ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” When Adam and Eve made the great mistake and were banished from The Garden of Eden, they also brought death into the world. God was the first to sacrifice an animal (Genesis 3:21) in order to provide a covering for His people. He was providing clothes for them as they left but it also begins a pattern that death must accompany the covering of sin and mistakes. Throughout the Old Testament God’s people sacrificed animals to continually provide payment for their sins, their mistakes, so that the price of sin and death, would not be theirs to pay with their lives. This would translate into an entire sacrificial system and laws around the sacrifices. Laws and traditions begin to compound until there is layer after layer complicating Jewish life. But the system was imperfect and was always intended to point to a need for a savior. They needed someone to pay the death-price so that they might live. They needed someone to pay it once and for all. But it could not be an ordinary human because they were not perfect enough, blameless enough, flawless enough, for God’s standard for sacrifice. So, He sent Himself in the form of His Son, Jesus. He was fully God and fully man. He lived the life we could not live and died the death we should have died and “we have been united with Him in a death like His” so “we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (v. 5).

You see, the best news and the reason we celebrate Easter is this – He did not stay dead. Death could not hold Him! In Revelation 1:18 Jesus says, “...I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Similarly, it says in our main passage (v. 9), “death no longer has dominion over him.” Death is no longer in control, and when we unite ourselves with Christ, when God accepts His payment on our

behalf, we are no longer responsible for the debt of our sins through death. “We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin” (vs.6-7). Jesus also tells us in John 11:25 that He is “the resurrection and the life” and that whoever “believe[s] in [Him] will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believe[s] in [Him] will never die.” Jesus stops the cycle of sacrifice and turns the world upside down with His life, His death, and His resurrection. In the present, we do not suffer a spiritual death and one day even physical death will be defeated once and for all.

We share in His righteousness (vv.6-11)

“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” Romans 6:6 shows us that our original self is not righteous. Our old self needs justification. Justified is one of those words that sounds really important but many of us never take the time to actually define. To be justified is to be made right, to be proven right, to be declared right or in right standing, to be made righteous. Before we had a relationship with Christ, we were not in right standing. We stood convicted. We were guilty. But we know that Jesus changes all that. Verse 11 reminds us that “you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 reinforces that saying, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” It is reminding us that Jesus’ defeat of death is shared with us, making us alive and changing the way we live our lives.

Because Jesus defeated death, because “our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (v. 6), our old mistakes and wrongs are no longer held against us. God looks at us and does not see our past but sees Christ’s sacrifice. The Pharisees thought they had to work and earn, to keep every single rule in order to gain righteousness but Jesus tells us that even their righteousness must be surpassed (Matthew 5). He wants us to catch what C.S. Lewis calls “the

good infection”, He wants us to become “little Christs”. When we are associated with Jesus, when we unite our lives with His, we are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.11), we share in the righteousness of Christ.

This changes not only our standing with God and how we see ourselves, but we see in 2 Corinthians above that it also changes how we view the world. This forgiveness, this justification, this righteousness, leads us to seek reconciliation for the world. It leads us to draw others to Jesus so that they might also break free of the chains of sin. We are free to be fully alive and we will naturally want that for others as well!

We share in the blessed life He came to give us (vv. 10-14)

If you read Genesis 3, you see that the mistakes of the past bring about a curse and humanity lives under that curse henceforward. Paul shows us that in Christ, however, you are not cursed but blessed. He says in Romans 6:11, that we are “alive to God in Christ Jesus”. Your debt of sin has been erased but more than that, the power that sin used to enslave you has been broken through Christ. You can now “present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (v.12). When we accept life through forgiveness, when we accept Jesus’ righteousness, we lose the holds that sin once had and begin that freedom journey that Paul references throughout all of Romans.

You no longer live under law but under grace; “sin [has] no dominion you, since you are not under law but under grace” (v.14). Galatians 3:13 reminds us that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Jesus took on the curse of all the mistakes and wrongs from the past, present, and future. He bore the weight of all of that to the cross and, when he died and resurrected, buried it forever. He defeated it once and for all. He bought your freedom and freely gave it to you. We can all look around our world and see brokenness. We feel the curse in our daily lives. Yet Christ died once and for all so that you could be “alive to God in Christ Jesus”, so that you “are not under law but under grace”, so that you will live free of the curse. He died so that you may live under God’s blessing.

In my English class, I started off on a better foot than I deserved because of my association with my sibling but I still had to do some work to keep that going. However, when we associate ourselves with Christ, when we surrender our lives to Him, He does the work. He paid the price. He took on the burden. And He doesn't leave you alone to figure it out from there. He gives you His Spirit to transform you inside so that you will live in light of these truths.

Discussion Questions

1. When is a time you felt like you received advantage or disadvantage because of your association with someone?
2. What are the attributes are someone who lives like they are safe from death?"
3. What are the ways we try to work to earn our salvation, like the sacrificial system, rather than resting in Jesus' work? – How do we go about resting in Jesus' work? What does that look like?
4. Do you see the world through the lens of reconciliation and justification? How would this change your outlook?
5. Why is it so hard to keep these things in mind?

Lesson 5 | Because He Lives: *We Have Help*

Heb. 4:14-16

by Steve Jones

Have you ever been in the middle of telling the story of a difficult or disturbing time in your life only to have someone else chime in, “Well, if you think that’s bad...” We live in a world of perpetual one-upmanship, no matter what it is. Had a success? Someone knows somebody more successful. Been sick? Someone else has been sicker. No matter what happens, it seems like there is always someone there to remind us that someone else somewhere else has it either better or worse than us.

We have even found ways of making people feel bad about what they perceive to be their problems. We label things “First World Problems” and say that we should learn to be grateful that we have it so much better than people in developing countries. There is even a whole approach to Missions that seems rooted not in awaking a passion to share the Gospel with those who have never heard, but rather to shame people into feeling bad because their standard of living is different than others.

This kind of behavior can leave people feeling ashamed or inadequate for struggling with things that seem easier for others, or embarrassed about asking for help since our problems evidently are insignificant compared to other people. The result is that we often run and hide when we encounter obstacles or failure. We don’t want to ask for help because we are worried about being shamed, or embarrassed, or lectured, or told to suck it up.

This can happen in our relationship with God, too. We need help because of our sin and because of our weakness. But often times, we run from God instead of to him. We are worried he will be angry at us for our failings, or disappointed at our weakness. But it is precisely this problem that Jesus came to fix. He came to help because he knows our true nature. The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus our Great High Priest, the best possible mediator between us and God and he gives reasons we should run TO God not FROM Him in the midst of suffering, trials, and mistakes.

Jesus is Sympathetic (v15)

“You have no idea what I’ve been through” “You don’t know what it’s like.” “Don’t judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his moccasins.” These are phrases that we sometimes use when we feel like others are being unfair in their expectations or unreasonable in their enforcement of a standard. We claim that if another person had to go through what we did, perhaps they wouldn’t be so harsh or unfeeling. Well, that is what the incarnation shows us. It shows us that God became man and walked among us. He took on our weak and wounded humanity and lived life as a man. The writer of Hebrews says that because of this, Jesus is able to be a great high priest for us because He can sympathize with our weakness. He knows what we are going through. He has gone through it too. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our needs. He knows our failings.

Jesus is Strong (v15)

Not only is Jesus sympathetic to our situation, he is strong to help us. The writer goes on to say that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” This may sound like we are about to get another lecture. Jesus lived as a man without succumbing to sin, why can’t you. But that is not the point. Jesus endured all that sin is capable of doing. So, he understands it completely and is He is able to offer aid to those who come to him. You see, sometimes, we think that evil people know more about evil than good people do. But that is not the case. Evil people give in to evil, so they never truly experience temptation’s full strength. CS Lewis describes it this way, “bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.” The fact the Jesus endured all the sin could dish out is proof that He cannot just relate to our situation, but he is also strong to help us through.

Jesus is the Source (v16)

Jesus endured sin. Jesus survived sin. Now Jesus desires to be the source of deliverance from sin for all who come to him. So, the writer invites us not just draw near...but to draw near with confidence. You will not be cast aside. You will not be humiliated or brow beat. Jesus is sympathetic. He knows what you are going through. Jesus is strong. He succeeds where you and I fail. Come to Him with confidence. Why?

Throne of Grace – Jesus is Lord. Lest we think that Jesus' desire to help us somehow makes him our servant or spiritual concierge, we are reminded that when we come to Jesus, we are coming to Him on a throne. But His throne isn't a throne of condemnation. His is a throne of Grace. We come to it and He dispenses not punishment but grace. Romans 8:1 says "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

What flows from this throne of Grace are the two things we need to cover our brokenness. You see we are broken in two ways. We are sinful and we are weak. We fail because we are rebellious and we struggle because we lack strength. So, from His throne of grace Jesus pours out what we need to overcome our brokenness.

First, Jesus gives Mercy. Mercy is one of the church words we say but don't always know what it means. Mercy means "not getting a bad thing we do deserve." Mercy is forgiveness of wrongs willfully committed. Sometimes we use the term forgiveness to apply to acts committed in ignorance or for which there is some excuse or justification. But that is not the case. If there is an excuse or justification for what a person did, then I need to accept the excuse. Mercy and forgiveness are precisely for those things that have no excuse: intentional, selfish, willful, rebellious sin. THAT is what mercy is for. That is what Jesus offers.

Second, Jesus offers Grace to Help in time of Need. We aren't just sinful, we are weak. We fail because we struggle. We are ashamed of our weaknesses. But this, as well, is unbiblical. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul recounts how he asked God to be delivered from a specific weakness. Verse 9 contains God's reply: "And He has said to me, "My grace is

sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Christ calls us to acknowledge our insufficiency and weakness because in our weakness, God is strong. To our weakness, Jesus offers grace, another word we sometimes don’t define. Grace is the flipside of mercy. Grace is “getting a good thing we don’t deserve.” The confusion probably comes from the fact that mercy is itself a good thing we don’t deserve, so mercy counts as an act of grace. But Jesus offers us grace to help us when we need it. That means you don’t have to go it alone. You don’t have to suck it up and try harder. You have to acknowledge your need and go to the real source of strength.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced spiritual one-upmanship? How did it make you feel? Why do we do it?
2. Why do we run from God instead of to Him?
3. Why is Jesus sympathetic with our weakness? What hope does this offer us?
4. What is mercy? Why do we need it?
5. What is grace? Why do we need it? What specifically is “grace to help in time of need?”

Lesson 6 | Because He Lives: *We Have Direct Access*

Heb. 10:19-26

by Steve Jones

The Temple of God in Jerusalem embodied in a single building the tension between God's love and God's holiness. God is holy. He is perfect and, because we are sinful, we cannot be in His presences. Not because He is too good for us, not because God is some sort of cosmic theological germophobe, but because "Our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29)." In the same way that a fire is either helpful or harmful based on your relationship to it, the consuming fire of God consumes sin. If we are still attached to sin, we would be consumed as well. His wrath is poured out on unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). Since we are covered in sin, holiness also means that God is set apart, separate, completely removed from sin. God is also love, He cares for the world that He has made and desires it to be remade. He doesn't abandon us, He comes to us, He makes a way for us to come back to Him. That is what the temple represented. God coming close to us. God making a way for us to get clean again and come back to Him. But it also represents God keeping a little distance. You can't get too close to God because of sin. So, God set up the temple to show His desire to bridge the gap and to remind us that there still is a gap. The temple shows us His love and His holiness.

The good news is that Jesus is the final solution to the problem of our sin. He is the final demonstration to us that God is both holy and love. Jesus is what the temple was designed to point to. That is why Jesus told the Jews: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. (John 2:19)" The body of Jesus is the better temple. The better place where God meets His people. That is what the disciples realized after Jesus died and rose from the dead. That is what the writer of Hebrews is saying in today's passage. To understand His argument most clearly, we need to understand how the temple was laid out.

The temple itself was in a large precinct. The outer area was called the Court of the Gentiles. Meaning that this was as far as gentiles could go. The next step was the Court of women. Men could go a little further. There was a narrow strip in the next area called the Court of Israel. Beyond that, only priests could go. The front room of the temple was called the Holy Place. At the center of the temple, was the holy of holies, the most holy place, where the ark of the covenant resided. It was set apart from the rest of the temple by a veil. No one was allowed into the holy place, except for the high priest who was allowed to go in once a year to make atonement for the people. No one else was allowed in there with him. There are even stories that the high priest would enter with a rope tied around one foot. On the off chance that he was struck down by God, the rope allowed him to be dragged back out of the holy place without having to send someone inside to retrieve him.

Such considerations no doubt made performing this duty filled with a fair amount of fear and trepidation. That is kind of the point, not that God is trying to scare, bully and intimidate us. But He is trying to get us to take sin seriously. He wants us to consider it as deadly and destructive as He does. Without this side of God, we would think that God's love means him blindly accepting however we choose to live as ok. No, God's love is a deep desire to see us separated from that which will cause death in our lives.

But the writer of Hebrews is saying that because of what Christ has done and who Christ is for us, we do not need to be afraid to enter into the presence of God. He has removed the boundaries and given us direct access. We can go to God, not because we have merited it, but because of what Christ has done.

What Christ Did

The writer of Hebrews is trying to get his readers to realize that Jesus has opened up the way to God and given them direct access. Look at verses 19 and 21. The author says twice, "Since we have..." He is trying to show them what is now theirs not because of their merit, but because of what Christ has done. Notice, the writer doesn't say that we have begrudging access, nor that we have been summoned to the cosmic principal's office, he says "we have confidence to enter the holy place."

We aren't timid priests nervously creeping into the holy of holies once a year with a rope tied around our foot. We can go confidently. Here is why.

• Jesus Goes Before Us (v20) "By a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh." – Inaugurate means "to begin." We can go confidently directly to God because Jesus has gone before us, opening up a path for us, blazing a new trail. How did He do that? Well the adjectives used to describe the way are the clue. He has made a "new" and "living" way. This is a place where the Greek words paint a vivid picture. The word for "new" actually means "freshly slain." It refers to a recent kill or sacrifice. The phrase "new and living" is probably better translated "freshly sacrificed and yet living." Before Jesus, the way into the holy place was opened by the blood sacrifice of animals. Jesus is the better sacrifice because He didn't just shed His blood for our sins, He rose again. When John meets Jesus in Revelation 1:17-18, this is what Jesus says: "17Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades." Jesus opened the path for us to God by not just offering a perfect sacrifice, but by rising again and he defeating sin and death. The way doesn't have to be repeatedly opened by perpetual sacrifice. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice. He opened up the way to God permanently.

• Jesus Goes With Us (v21) "we have a great high priest over the house of God." – Not only does Jesus goes before us, blazing the trail, He also goes with us. He is not just our perfect sacrifice, He is our perfect representative. He is our High Priest, who is able to make intercession for us. Because He is sinless, He doesn't need to get His own sins forgiven first. Because He never dies, He doesn't need to be replaced. Because He became a man, He knows what we are going through and can represent us.

What We Are Called To Do

Christianity is not a passive religion. Some people think that since you can't earn your salvation, then there is nothing to do. Or they think that anything you are asked to do in obedience is just a subtle attempt at legalism. But that is not the case. Christianity isn't opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. The two are different. Laboring mightily so that

you can deserve and earn something is different from laboring mightily out of gratitude for what you have been freely given. That is where the author turns. Based on what Christ has done for us, here is what He encourages believers to do.

Let Us Draw Near – You have direct access...Use it. Imagine having tickets to the World Series and watching the game on TV. Imagine being invited to meet a childhood hero, and instead sitting outside or doing something else. Because of Christ, we have direct access to God. The door is wide open. We weren't just given a begrudging invitation. Look at the adjectives used to describe how we can go to God: confidently (v19), sincerely (v22), with full assurance, (v22). You are wanted. You are welcome. Go to God. Go to God in worship. Go to God with your problems. Seek God and you will find the love, joy, peace and fulfillment that you have been looking for.

Let Us Hold Fast – Not only are we invited to go to God, we are encouraged to hold fast our confession. That means persevere in what we believe. There will come times when it seems like the things we say we believe don't look true. Maybe it will be when you see evil people prosper or good people suffering. Maybe you are meeting persecution for following Christ, and you are worrying whether Christ's promises are true. Kind of like a paratrooper who has studied how parachutes work, and how they are packed might get a little nervous the first time he steps to the door to use one. Will it really hold in real life? The audience for Hebrews was beginning to suffer for their faith. Many were considering going back to their old life. Christianity was costing too much and they weren't sure there would be a payoff. The author says "hold fast" don't let go. Hold on a little while longer. Why? "because the one who promised is faithful." Trust God in the little things and you will begin to see that God is faithful. This will give you grace to trust Him in bigger things. God is faithful, which means He can be relied upon.

Let Us Consider – Not only are we supposed to focus on going to God and on trusting God in our current situation, but we are also supposed to think about how to encourage others. "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." It doesn't say lecture or browbeat. It doesn't say shame or accuse. It says we are supposed to sit around thinking about ways to encourage others to love better and do good things. So many times, we think of Christianity as an

individual religion. We aren't the first. You are invited into God's family, which means you have heavenly siblings. Christianity isn't just about you and God. We are supposed to be helping others follow Jesus better. You can't do that unless you are involved in a church. Evidently, some people this letter was addressed to have been skipping church: "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some." We need church because we need to be among people who are seeking God as well, who are able to motivate us, and whom we are able to encourage.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the tension between God's holiness and God's love? How is this represented in the temple?
2. How did Christ gain direct access to God for us?
3. What does it mean to go confidently to God? What's the difference between going confidently and going arrogantly?
4. How can we learn to hold fast our confession?
5. What does it mean to consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds?

Lesson 7 | Because He Lives: *We Know God Exists*

Mk. 2:1-12

by Steve Jones

I love HEB, and I am not the only one. HEB is routinely ranked as one of the best, if not the best, grocery stores in America. Frankly, I don't know how people outside of Texas survive without it. I am not sure which is worse, not knowing HEB exists, or knowing it exists and not being able to go to one. One thing I love about HEB is this thing they call their "Meal Deal," in which they put a main entree dinner item on sale, then offer, for free, every possible other item you would need to have a complete meal. An example of a meal deal might be: buy a small pot roast and receive potatoes, carrots, rolls, a box of cookies, and a jug of tea for free. Just buy one thing and you get everything else thrown in for free.

Why am I bringing this up? Well, forgive the potentially sacrilegious metaphor, but Christianity is a lot like an HEB Meal Deal. The foundational claim of Christianity is that Jesus died and rose again. By foundational, I mean that everything else is built on top of it. Believing in the resurrection is the main course. Once you buy it, you realize you get the answers to so many other questions thrown in.

We are beginning a series on Apologetics, which simply means the study of arguments defending our faith. The word "apologetics" comes from the Greek word "apologia" which doesn't mean to be sorry or apologize, it means to give a defense.

There are a lot of different ways to approach apologetics. Some people use philosophy to make profound arguments. Some use history to gather evidence to support the historical reliability of the Bible. Some even use literature and the arts to tell stories that show how the story of Christianity answers the deepest questions of the human heart.

(See the Resources Page at the end of this study for a short list of these works.)

I think the greatest Apologetics tool is the Resurrection. Whenever someone asks me what I believe about things like the problem of evil, disagreements in religion, or even whether or not there is a god, my approach is simply to say: "What did Jesus say about that?" and why do I believe Jesus? Because He rose from the dead.

So, over the next few weeks, we are going to look at how the resurrection can help us answer some of the big questions every person asks. We will then end, on the Sunday before Easter, with a defense of the resurrection itself. It might seem odd to end the study with the resurrection instead of beginning with it. But we are doing this for two reasons: first, so that we are studying the same issues in community groups as we are in the sermon series; and second, so that we have a chance really close to Easter to make a case for the resurrection for people who don't normally come to church any other time. Perhaps postponing the discussion of the resurrection will build in us some excitement and anticipation as we realize how much really does depend on the fact the Jesus was alive on Easter Sunday.

The first question we are tackling is Does God Exist? Such a simple question to ask, but not so simple of a question to answer.

One reason the question is so hard to answer is because people ask it in different ways. We say things like "If God is real, why can't I see Him," or "If there is a God, why is there so much evil in the world," or "If God exists, why do people disagree on who He is?" These are all good questions in their own right and are worth addressing individually. But they do not necessarily disprove God's existence, but rather raise questions about God's nature.

Another reason the question is hard to answer is that people ask it from different perspectives. Some people ask the question from a skeptical or antagonistic point of view. Others have sincere, honest doubts and don't know what is true. Still others claim to have faith but have questions that are gnawing on their faith and make them think they are losing it.

The good news is that there are some really good arguments for the existence of God. Ultimately, though, the existence of God is one of those things that is true because Jesus rose from the dead. The argument goes something like this: Jesus claimed to be God. If He was right, then God exists. Why should you believe Jesus's claim to be God?

Because He rose from the dead.

Jesus Claimed to be the God of Israel (John 8:56-59)

Some suggest that Jesus never claimed to be God. This is simply not true. Though we have no record of Him actually saying the phrase, “I am God,” there are several places where Jesus clearly states that He considers Himself to be one with the Father.

The term “god” is very generic. It’s nondescript. The Jews did not believe in “god.” They believed in a specific God, the God who revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The God who gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. And that God had a name. In Exodus 3:13-15, at the Burning Bush, when God sends Moses to Egypt to deliver His people, Moses asks God what His name is: “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, I AM has sent me to you.”

I AM is the name that God reveals to Moses. It refers to the fact that God didn’t come into being. He just IS. There is no past or future to God. This name of God is often translated throughout the Old Testament as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” or “Lord (in all caps).” In the New Testament, there are several places where Jesus uses the phrase, “I am.” Each time He does so, He is claiming to be the God of the Hebrews. An example of this can be found in John 8:56-59. Jesus is talking to the Jews about how they claim to follow Abraham but Abraham himself was rejoicing about Jesus. Towards the end, notice what Jesus says and how the Jews respond:

“⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” ⁵⁹ Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.”

Before Abraham was, I AM. We might just read over that quickly. But the Jews knew what He meant. He was claiming to be God and so they picked up stones and tried to kill Him for blaspheming.

Jesus Claimed to Forgive Sins (Mark 2:1-12)

Another way that Jesus claimed to be God is through forgiving sins. Jesus didn't just forgive sins that people had committed against Him. He forgave all their sins. Let's look closely at a scene in Mark 2 where a paralytic man is brought to Jesus by his friends. Jesus takes this opportunity not only to heal but to show us who He really is.

Jesus Meets a Paralytic Man (v1-4): Jesus comes to Capernaum and begins to teach. The house is soon flooded with people coming to hear Him. Luke 5:17 says that in addition to teaching, "the power of the Lord was present for Him to perform healing." Four men rush their paralytic friend to Jesus. When they don't find a way into the house, they dig a hole in the roof and lower the man down on his stretcher before Jesus. Most houses in Judea were made of mudbrick. The roofs were flat and sometimes had stairs or a ladder going up so that people could use the roof like a terrace in the cool of the evening. So, we shouldn't be shocked that they were able to get up there. What is amazing is that they were able to dig a hole in the roof big enough to lower a man on a stretcher. For some reason, this always strikes me as a little bit comical. Do you think Jesus and the people below heard the scratching or noticed debris begin to fall on them? Do you think they were accurate in the first hole they started, or did they have to try again when they realized they were not digging directly over Jesus? However the scene materialized, the men were successful in deconstructing the roof and in lowering their friend down through the opening in front of Jesus.

Jesus Forgives a Paralytic Man (v5-7): If that wasn't startling enough, what Jesus does in response definitely raises eyebrows. He comments on the faith of the man's friends, then proceeds to forgive the paralytic man's sins. The Pharisees realize the significance of what Jesus just did. Verse 7 is such an important verse. The Pharisees say, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins except God alone?" They know that only God has the power to forgive all of someone's sins. They realize Jesus is claiming to be the God who forgives sin. So, they accuse Him of blasphemy.

But there is another group that was probably scandalized by what Jesus said. Think about it. Four men brought their sick friend to Jesus, destroying someone else's house along the way. They wanted their friend healed. Can you see them peeking in through the hole they dug? Maybe one of them whispered to another up there on the roof, "So, did He heal him? What is happening? I can't see." The other says, "Wait, Jesus is saying something... nope, He didn't heal him, He just forgave his sins." Then maybe another one of

them hollered down, “No, Jesus, he can’t walk! We brought him here for healing.”

Jesus Heals a Paralytic Man (v8-12): What happens next shows that Jesus is orchestrating the moment to reveal something about Himself to everyone. He asks those present a question. Which is easier to say to a paralytic: “your sins are forgiven” or “get up ...and walk?” The truth is that the first one is easier “to say.” Why? Because there is no way to tell whether you actually did it or not. Telling a paralytic person to stand up and walk is incredibly difficult because there will be visible, tangible proof of whether you have the power to do what you say.

That is the point Jesus is working towards. He is demonstrating to people that He has the power to do what they cannot see by showing He has the power to do what they can see. In Mark 2:10-11 Jesus says, ¹⁰ “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the paralytic, ¹¹ “I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home.”

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord

Sometimes we try to make Jesus easier to handle by pretending He was just a good teacher. Some suggest that Jesus never claimed to be God. This is simply not true. Though we have no record of Him actually saying the phrase, “I am God,” there are several places where Jesus clearly states that He considers Himself to be one with the God of Israel and claims for Himself God’s ability to forgive all sins. You can choose not to believe that Jesus is who He said He is. But you can’t pretend that He didn’t claim to be God. It’s a scandalous claim that prevents us from thinking of Him simply as a good teacher.

Only three kinds of people claim to be God: crazy people, deceivers, and God. So, He either wasn’t God and knew He wasn’t, which makes Him a liar. He wasn’t God and didn’t know it, which makes Him a lunatic. Or He was, and is, God. Those are the only three choices we have.

As CS Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, “You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Conclusion

The Good news is that the resurrection of Jesus gives us reason to believe that Jesus is who He said He is. And if He is who He said He is, then God exists. The hard part is that the God revealed in Jesus is more than a philosophical abstraction to talk about in classes or coffee shops. Jesus shows us more than whether God exists. He shows us who God is. And calls us into relationship with Him. That ends up being more than some people bargain for.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever wondered if God exists?
2. How does Jesus saying “I am” count as Jesus claiming to be God?
3. How does Jesus saying “Your sins are forgive” count as claiming to be God?
4. What does Liar, Lunatic or Lord mean? Why is it impossible to think of as just a good teacher?
5. How does the resurrection prove that God exists?

Lesson 8 | Because He Lives: *The Problem of Evil*

Rev. 1:17-18

by Steve Jones

I remember sitting across the table from a good friend of mine who asked to meet me for coffee. After a few minutes of pleasantries, he finally nervously summoned up the courage to ask his question, or more accurately, to make a statement. "I think I am losing my faith." I asked him why he felt he was losing his faith, and he responded that he was trying to come to terms with how God could be good and there could be so much evil in the world. The first thing out of my mouth surprised him. I said, "You aren't losing your faith, you're gaining it."

Most people interpret the doubts they experience as temptations to stop believing in God. More likely, this is an opportunity to grow in our understanding of who God is. As Christians, we shouldn't be afraid of asking questions. Faith isn't blindly believing what we are told. Faith means basing our lives on what we have to believe to be true. And confirming what we believe is true is a very reasonable thing to do. Too many people have been turned away from Christianity because they were asking questions...good questions...and not only would no one answer them, maybe they were even told that asking the question itself was wrong. My friend thought he was drifting away from God when actually God was drawing him closer by provoking in him questions that were encouraging him to seek answers and to seek God.

But his specific question, wasn't just a good question. It is THE question. One of the most important ones. Inquire long enough of most people and you will find that the one thing they really don't understand is the problem of evil. They might use different language like, "Why do bad things happen to good people." But they still ask it. Ask people who have walked away from God or who are increasingly skeptical of His existence, and you find at the heart of their objection a claim that all the evil in the world is proof that God isn't real.

Look in the Bible, the oldest book in the Old Testament is the book of Job, a 40-chapter inquiry into the goodness of God in the midst of suffering. It's okay to ask the question. There are good answers. But before we answer the question, it is important for us to articulate it clearly. Having a clear understanding of the problem will help us not only to seek answers but also to see how certain answers are overly simplistic and fall short.

Here is the Problem of Evil in its simplest form: there are 4 statements that don't seem to be able to all be true:

1. God is all knowing
2. God is all powerful
3. God is all good
4. Evil exists

To many people's minds, it doesn't seem possible for all these statements to be true at the same time. If God really was all knowing, He would know every time someone was about to commit evil. If He was all powerful, He could stop them from doing evil. If He was all good, then He would want to stop them. But evil does exist, so therefore, either God isn't one of those things, or He isn't there at all.

If you look closely at rival worldviews and philosophies, you will find ways that people have tried to solve this problem by negating one of these premises. Polytheism denies God's power by saying there are more than one god in control. Pantheism denies God's goodness by saying that everything is God even the stuff we happen not to like. Believe it or not, some even deny the existence of evil. Buddhism denies the existence of evil and claims it is an illusion. And Atheism denies God's existence all together.

First Steps in Answering the Problem

Before we look closely at the heart of the Christian answer, there are a few preliminary topics that need to be addressed that will prepare us to understand the heart of the Christian claim.

God Didn't Create Evil – If God created everything, then did God create evil? No, God did not create evil. Then, where did evil come from? Well, the answer to this question starts with considering the nature of evil. God created everything in the world, and it was good. Evil isn't a thing, nor is it found in things. It's a misuse of a thing, a twisting of it from what it was intended to be used for. Take, for example, a knife. In the hands of a surgeon, it can save a life. In the hands of a robber, it can take it. Evil cannot create, it can only twist and corrupt what God originally created good. Evil is a shadow. Good can exist without evil. Evil can't exist without good.

God Hates Evil – It is also important to remember that God hates evil. In Romans 1:18, Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." On first look, this verse might make God sound harsh and unloving. But look closer and notice what it says the wrath of God is revealed against.... not people but on ungodliness and unrighteousness. God hates sin. God's wrath is against sin. Why? Because sin causes death. Romans 6:23 that "the wages of sin is death." Death is what sin pays out. Death is what sin produces in our lives. When we seek sin, we find death. That is why God hates sin. You see, God's wrath is one part of the answer to the problem of evil. God is as mad about sin and death and evil as we are. In fact, He is more mad than we are at all the evil, sin, pain, and death in the world and He is actively working to free us from it and to destroy it forever.

God Suffered Evil – One of the hardest things about suffering evil is thinking that no one knows what we are going through. The incarnation shows us that God became man and walked among us. He took on our weak and wounded humanity and lived life as a man (Philippians 2:5-11). The writer of Hebrews says that because of this, Jesus knows what we are going through. He has gone through it too. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our needs. He knows our failings. Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things

as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” These verses show us that Jesus is proof that God is sympathetic to our suffering and strong to help us. He offers us mercy and grace to help in time of need. Mercy means “not getting a bad thing we do deserve.” Mercy is forgiveness of wrongs willfully committed. Grace is the flipside of mercy. Grace is “getting a good thing we don't deserve.” Jesus offers us grace to help us when we need it. That means you don't have to go it alone. You don't have to suck it up and try harder. You just have to acknowledge your need and go to the real source of strength.

God Mourns Evil – John 11:35 is the shortest verse in the Bible. All it says is, “Jesus wept.” But it may be one of the most profound. It happens while Jesus is discussing the death of His friend Lazarus with his sisters Mary and Martha. He has just told Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He is about to raise Lazarus from the dead. But standing at the tomb of His friend, Jesus is moved to tears at all the suffering and pain. He knew what He was about to do. He knew that their weeping was about to turn to amazement and joy. But He didn't mock them or chastise them for their grief. He wept with them. “Jesus wept” is proof that Jesus cares about us and the pain we are going through. No matter how insignificant it may seem to others. No matter that one day He will undo all the sin and evil and pain in the world. Right now. In the midst of your grief, Jesus grieves too. In the midst of your tears, Jesus cries too. Jesus knows your pain, and it hurts Him too.

The Resurrection Proves: Jesus Defeated Evil (Rev 1:17-18)

It may be reassuring to know that God didn't create evil, and that He hates it, has gone through it, and mourns it. But if that is all there is, then it doesn't get us very far. Fortunately, those ideas all prepare us to hear the central Christian answer to the problem of evil. Jesus defeated it.

In Revelation 1:17-18, John recounts meeting the Risen Jesus when he writes,¹⁷ When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive

forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

Jesus tells John that He was dead and has come back to life and because of that not only will He never die again, but He has power over death.

The Resurrection Proves: Evil Wont Wreck God’s Plan

Many times, we think that evil people are in control. But our lives are in God’s hands, not theirs. All the evil in the world doesn’t wreck God’s plan. Paul reassures us in Romans 8:28 that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” God isn’t shocked or scared by all the evil in the world. He doesn’t like it. But it is not surprising to Him. And He is powerful to cause all thing to work together for good.

One great example of this happens in the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph’s older brothers hate him and sell him into slavery. While in slavery, he is falsely accused of a crime and thrown into prison. While in prison, he helps people who promise to remember him and get him out, but they don’t. Finally, after a lot of heartache, he gets out of prison and is exalted to a place of power where he comes face to face with the brothers who started this whole mess. Instead of exacting revenge, he says in Genesis 50:20, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to keep many people alive.” Joseph doesn’t excuse his brothers’ sins against him or even try to pretend it was good. What he does say is that God took what they intended for evil and used it to do good.

The Resurrection of Jesus Proves: Evil Won’t have the Last Word (Rev. 21:1-5)

Revelation 21 shows us what the world will look like when God restores His creation. Verses 4 and 5 say, “⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”⁵ And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” These verses show us that God promises to heal what is broken

and end all pain. And most amazingly, He will make all things new again. This means that there will not be a single place where sin, death, or evil claim a victory that will be allowed to stand. Every single instance will be overturned and everything God made will be remade how He always intended for it to be.

It might sound too good to be true. But we can rest assured that it is true...because He lives.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever wrestled with the problem of evil? What are some different ways people ask the question? What are some bad or incomplete answers that the world offers to this question?
2. Did God create evil? What is evil? What is evil's relationship to good?
3. What does Romans 1:18 say about God's wrath? How is God's wrath proof that He hates evil?
4. What is the significance of the incarnation when it comes to the problem of evil?
5. How does the resurrection show that evil is defeated? How does it show that evil won't have the last word?

Lesson 9 | Because He Lives: *We Can Trust the Bible*

John 5:39-40

by Steve Jones

The Bible is one of those books that is frequently discussed but rarely read. On the surface, the Bible is a deceptively simple book. The first book, Genesis, starts at the beginning and tells the story of the creation of the world and of man. The last book, Revelation, tells the story of how everything will end. Based on that, many people assume that the Bible reads like a novel. They start reading at the beginning and frequently get either lost or confused.

The Bible is more than a book; it is a library. It is a compilation of 66 individual books, written in multiple languages, by multiple authors, in several different cultures, over a period of several hundred years. There are frequently things that either don't make sense to us or may even appear to be contradictions. Sometimes the Bible authors seem to advocate positions or ideas or actions that seem either bizarre, or repugnant to us. We recoil at the Bible's commands regarding sex, or ethics, or other religions.

Caught between confusion and conviction, many people throw up their hands in either disgust or defeat and say things like: "The Bible is a bunch of fables" and "it is full of so many problems that it is impossible to reconcile" and "imperfect people could never write a perfect book" and "if it were really from God, it would be more.... fill in the blank."

Some people wonder whether searching for answers is worth the time. Why bother trying to find solutions to the problems? Why attempt to reconcile the issues? Why isn't it easier to say that it is a flawed religious text with historical significance and move on?

In the face of such obstacles, how can we regain our confidence that the Bible is from God, is worth our study, and can be trusted to show us how to live? There is a lot of evidence that we could consider to help bolster our faith in the trustworthiness of the Bible. Countless people have dedicated their lives to researching and defending the Bible. But the best starting

point is the words of Jesus Himself.

When people ask me why I believe the Bible and why I believe that it is possible to find answers and solutions to apparent problems in scripture, my answer is simple. I believe the Bible because Jesus believed the Bible. Though some people have difficulty believing that God speaks in the Bible, most serious Bible scholars acknowledge that the Gospels do contain accurate accounts of what Jesus taught. It is very reasonable to believe that Jesus said the things listed in the Gospels. The issue is whether we believe He was right or not. The resurrection is proof we can trust that the things He taught were true. So, let's look closely at what Jesus believed about the Bible, so that we can learn to trust the Bible and search for answers ourselves.

Jesus Taught that God Speaks in Scripture (Matt. 4:4; Matt 22:29; John 10:34-5)

Christians believe that the Bible is more than a historical book and more than an ancient religious text. Christians believe that the Bible contains the record of a God who speaks.

Many people point to passages like 2 Timothy 3:16, which says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness." The work that gets translated as "inspired by God" is the Greek word *theopneustos*, which literally means "God breathed." But why should you believe that?

This is indeed a great description about what the Bible is, but why should we accept it? Suppose I said that I speak for God and am always right, and you asked me why you should believe me. You would look at me funny if I said, "because I speak for God and am always right." That is called circular reasoning and is a philosophical fallacy.

This is a great passage, and we will come back to it. But a better reason to believe that God speaks in the Bible is the words of Jesus. There are several places in the Gospels where Jesus talks about God speaking through the Scriptures.

In Matthew 4:4, during His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus says, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes

out of the mouth of God.” He quotes Scripture and calls it the word coming from the mouth of God.

During a debate with the Pharisees, Jesus says in Matthew 22:29 - “You are mistaken, since you do not understand the Scriptures nor the power of God.” We might want to go look at the topic they were arguing about in this passage, but for our purposes it is most important to realize that Jesus equates Scriptures with the power of God.

In a different debate, in John 10:34-35, Jesus says, “³⁴ Has it not been written in your Law: ‘I SAID, YOU ARE GODS’? ³⁵ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be nullified).” The first part of these verses may seem bizarre and hard to understand. Many people aren’t sure what exactly they were fighting about. But don’t let that keep you from noticing what Jesus says at the end. First, He says that Scripture is “the Word of God” and that it cannot be “nullified” which means it has authority and can tell us what to do.

All of these passages show us that Jesus thought the Bible was the very Word of God to us.

Jesus Taught that Scripture Reveals God’s Will (John 17:17; James 1:22-26)

Jesus didn’t just believe the Bible revealed God’s voice. He believed that it revealed God’s will to us about how to live. In John 17:17, while praying on the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus asked the Father to “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Sanctify means to make holy or perfect. Jesus asks God to use truth to make us holy and blameless, then He points out that God’s Word is truth. In those few words, Jesus says almost exactly what Paul said in 2 Timothy. God’s Word is useful in helping us grow into the people He wants us to be.

This is the point where the 2 Timothy 3:16 we looked at earlier becomes helpful. Paul shows us clearly that the Bible makes us holy: “All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness.” Because the Bible is God-breathed, it is useful to help us become the people that God wants us to be.

This involves giving information (teaching), convicting us about sin (rebuke), disciplining us when we get off course (correction), and helping us learn to do what is right (training in righteousness).

We study the Bible to know God. We also study it to know what God wants us to do. Knowing the truth is not enough, though. James tells his audience this in James 2:19, "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." Demons have Bible degrees. They know a great deal about God. They have just chosen not to serve Him.

Our reading of scripture is equally pointless unless we put it into action. In James 1:22-26, James calls the distinction the difference between being a hearer and a doer of the Word:

"But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

Reading the Bible and not doing what it says is like reading a map but never taking a trip or reading a cookbook and never preparing any of the meals. We read the Scripture so that we can know what God wants us to do....so that we can do it.

Jesus Taught that Scripture Leads Us to Abundant Life (John 5:39-40; Psalm 1)

Sometimes when we talk about God's will, our thoughts go to pictures of dull, dreary, boring obedience to hard obligations. But the truth is that God desires our joy. The Bible makes some bold claims about the blessings that await the person who becomes the student of His Word. A perfect picture of this is found in Psalm 1:1-3:

“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.”

The Law of the Lord is another name for the Word of God. This passage promises us that if we will think deeply about and drink in the Word of God, we will be like trees planted firmly by a river. The tree in this passage experiences productivity (yields fruit), it thrives (leaves do not wither), and it prospers. That is what we can expect when we study God's Word. It will change us. Notice the tree does nothing, but it stays near the water. The water does everything else. The same is true for us. When we plant our lives next to the stream of God's Word, we will find the blessing and abundant life we were intended for.

Those are pretty staggering promises. We can have confidence that they are true because Jesus says so. One of the places He says this is in John 5 in an argument with the Pharisees about how to find this life in studying the Scriptures. In John 5:39-40, ³⁹“You examine the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is those very Scriptures that testify about Me; ⁴⁰and yet you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” Scripture has power because of the God who speaks in and through it. It is worth studying because, above all, it points us to Jesus. Scripture is able to give us life because studying its pages will lead us to Jesus, who, as John 10:10 says, “came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly.” The Bible promises that that if we read it, we will find blessing and life.

But it is not an end in and of itself. The Bible is a means to an end. It is a signpost. It doesn't have life. It points to life. The life we are looking for starts by searching the Scripture. Where that search will lead us is to Jesus and the abundant life He came to bring us.

Conclusion

There is still work to be done to understand the Bible. But we can have confidence that our search and our study are not in vain because of Jesus. So, when someone ask why you believe that the Bible reveals God's Word to us, that it shows us God's will, and that it will lead us to life, respond, "I believe Jesus." When they ask why you believe Jesus, reply, "Because He rose from the dead."

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced doubt about the reliability of Scripture? How did you deal with it?
2. How does the resurrection give us confidence in Scripture? What did Jesus teach about Scripture?
3. What does 2 Timothy 3:16 teach us about the value of Scripture?
4. What did Jesus mean in John 17:17 when he asked the father to sanctify us in truth and that His Word is truth?
5. What does John 5:39-40 teach us about the purpose of Scripture? How does it related to Psalm 1?

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