

YOU ARE MADE RIGHT WITH GOD**ROMANS 4:20-25, 10:9-10; PHIL. 3:7-11**

You've heard about C and E Christians, right? These are alleged followers of Jesus who only ever show up for church at Christmas and Easter. Once upon a time, one wife was beside herself with annoyance at her husband and terribly embarrassed for both of them. He'd stuck his foot in his mouth and didn't even know it. It was Easter Sunday morning, and the couple was standing at the back of the church, shaking hands with the pastor. "You're in a rut, Reverend," said her husband. "You preach about the Resurrection every time I come here."

Now this year, you might be forgiven for making a similar observation, because we're taking an in depth look at the resurrection of Jesus over seven Sundays! Why? Because the Bible portrays it as the great essential. For example, it says, "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins." (1 Cor. 15:17 NLT) Today, we're going to consider some Scripture passages that clearly teach Jesus' resurrection is essential to being made right with God. In other words, being saved, having a personal relationship with God, being accepted by God, going to Heaven for eternity when we die - or whatever other terminology you want to use - is based on the fact Jesus rose from the dead on Easter. I can't think of anything more essential than that, can you? Let's read two Bible passages now and think about what they teach. Here's a question that can be answered two ways. What's the impact of Jesus' resurrection on my relationship with God?

JESUS HAD TO RISE FROM THE DEAD FOR ME TO BE MADE RIGHT WITH GOD.

The version of the Bible I just read from put it like this, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (Rom. 4:25 NIV) Another version renders the same verse like this, "He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God." (Rom. 4:25 NLT) Now, you might be saying to yourself, "I thought it was Jesus' death on the cross that made me right with God." Actually, it's better to say, "Jesus' death *and resurrection* made me right with God." The Bible teaches that Jesus' resurrection completed what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Neither the cross nor the resurrection achieved anything without the other. Jesus had to die and He also had to rise from the dead for you and me to experience a restored relationship with the God of the universe.

Let's back up a minute. What does it mean for God to justify me or make me right with Him? Well, that's real the heart of it all, isn't it? That's the central message of the Christian faith. That's what we call the Gospel which simply means the good news. An absolutely holy God sees all of us as sinners which makes us unacceptable to Him in terms of a personal relationship. In fact, because each of us is guilty of sin, each of us is deserving of death and eternal damnation. When Jesus - who was perfect and never committed even one sin - died on the cross, He took our place. He died the death we deserved. Justification or being made right with God happens when God declares someone free from the guilt and penalty of sin. Justification means it's "just as if" you

never sinned at all. You are now accepted by God meaning any and every barrier to a personal relationship with God has been removed eternally. It doesn't mean you're perfect yet or that you never sin again. Instead, it's an all-important change in your status before God. The guilt of my sin has been transferred to Jesus. His perfect goodness has been transferred to me. As a result, God now accepts me.

What was necessary to remove the guilt of my sin? Either my death or the death of a perfect substitute. Fortunately, Jesus was perfectly qualified to be my substitute. But if Jesus remained dead in the tomb today, it would mean God did not accept or recognize what He did as valid. My sins would not be forgiven. I would still be unacceptable to God and doomed to spend an eternity in Hell. But when Jesus rose on Easter Day, it was as if God said, "Completed. Done. Mission accomplished." Now the only way for anyone to ever be made right with God has been eternally established and is a viable option for anyone who puts his or her faith in Jesus.

Jesus' resurrection demonstrated the cross wasn't just a messy end for some would-be, but misguided Messiah. It was an act of salvation planned and orchestrated by God Himself. Who was responsible for the terrible crime of the crucifixion? Some say it was the Jewish leaders. Others say it was the Roman government. Yes, it's true both were culpable. But the ultimate answer is God Himself was responsible for Jesus' death. The Bible says, "He did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all." (Rom. 8:32 NLT) Jesus' death was no tragic accident, but the center piece of God's plan. And then when Jesus rose from the dead, it's all the evidence we need that God accepted what Jesus did on the cross as full payment for your sin and mine. His plan was successful. The resurrection is proof every follower of Jesus is made right before God.

Remember Barabbas? He was a murderer and a thief arrested by the Romans and awaiting execution when Jesus was on trial. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, wanted to save Jesus and so he hit on the idea of offering the people a choice between the two. Should he release Jesus or Barabbas? He was astonished when the people shouted, "Barabbas!" Can you see Barabbas sitting there in prison, staring at his hands which were soon to be pierced with nails, already shuddering with horror at the thought of that hammer coming down to fasten him to the cross? He hears the crowd shouting, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" He thinks they're shouting about him. Then a prison guard unlocks the door to his cell and Barabbas thinks the time of his execution has finally come. But instead, the guard tells him he is free to go. Someone named Jesus of Nazareth is to die today instead. Instead of Barabbas.

I wonder if a stunned, but curious Barabbas might have joined the procession of those following Jesus to Golgotha that awful day. If so, Barabbas hears the awful sound of that hammer. Those nails were meant for him. Then, he sees the cross lifted up and dropped into place. He is the one who should be hanging there. He hears all that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.... It is finished.... Father, into your hands, I commit My spirit." Then, Barabbas would have heard Jesus cry out and die. Barabbas might have said, "That man – Jesus – took my

place. I am the one who should have died. He died for me.” Barabbas was the only man who could say that Jesus took his physical place. But every forgiven sinner past, present, and future – including you and me – can say Jesus took our spiritual place. And it was the resurrection three days later that confirmed and completed what Jesus accomplished at the cross. Do you see why it’s so essential?

What’s the impact of Jesus’ resurrection on my relationship with God? Here’s another way of saying it. Jesus’ resurrection guaranteed that God’s grace and my faith will result in my salvation. In the Romans 4 passage, Paul wrote about Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. He’s also the spiritual father of anyone – Jew or non-Jew - who has been made right with God. Abraham wasn’t made right with God through his own personal goodness or through any kind of religious ritual. Instead, Abraham was made right before God by faith. Earlier Paul had written, “We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.” (Rom. 3:22 NLT) What was true of Abraham is also true for you and me. Scripture says, “And because of Abraham’s faith, God counted him as righteous.... God will also count us as righteous if we believe in him, the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” (Rom. 4:22-24 NLT)

In the Philippians 3 passage we read, Paul made a similar argument. He had the finest Jewish ancestry and pedigree a man could have. He was very moral by the standards of the Old Testament Law. But it wasn’t enough. “I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.” (Phil. 3:9 NLT) Most people acknowledge having a good relationship with God is very important and highly valuable. But most people still believe God is impressed with whatever personal credentials or achievements we have to offer. If you ask the average person – your neighbor, a friend at school, someone who works in the next office – what he or she believes about having a relationship with God, you get the most interesting answers.

“Oh, I was baptized when I was a baby” or “I got baptized at a church as a teenager.” Water gets you wet. It doesn’t create a relationship with God. Many will say, “Oh, I believe in God. I believe Jesus is God’s Son.” But so does the devil. Most will claim, “Well, I am a moral person. I’m honest. I’m kind. I’m a good provider. I take good care of my family. I help others in need.” Good for you, but God demands perfection from anyone in a relationship with Him. “Well, I grew up in a church” or “I’ve been a member of Karl Road Baptist Church for years now. I give money to the church. I serve in several ministries.” All of those personal credentials and achievements are good in and of themselves. But not one of them has the power to make you right with God.

Here’s the irony. On the one hand, nothing is more humbling than realizing you can’t be made right with God on your own merits. On the other hand, nothing is more wonderful than realizing you can’t be made right with God on your own merits. You have to throw yourself on Jesus – who He is and what He did for you on the cross and the empty tomb. God doesn’t owe salvation to anyone. No one earns or deserves an eternal

relationship with Him. Salvation, being made right with God, justification, eternal life – whatever term you prefer - is a gift God gives you. That's grace. That's always where salvation begins. But I have to reach out and take that gift. I have to appropriate it and make it mine. I must receive it. That's faith. My faith is how I take hold of everything God's grace has provided to me. The Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9 ESV) There's one event that ratified that entire arrangement. Sealed it. Confirmed it. Completed it. Guaranteed it. Made it available to anyone yesterday, today, and tomorrow. What was it? The resurrection of Jesus.

Think of Jesus' resurrection as a store receipt. If you're in a department store and you buy some clothes, you should always ask for the receipt. Why? Because if you're still walking around the store, a plainclothes security person might stop you and ask, "Excuse me, can I look in your bag?" And if you don't have a receipt you could get in trouble. You want to be able to hold up your receipt and say, "Oh, plainclothes security person, trouble me not. This receipt proves this item has been paid for and I do not have to pay it again." The resurrection is a giant receipt stamped across history for all people to see, a receipt that allows you and me to know that our future is certain if we believe in Jesus Christ. Do you see how essential it is? What is the impact of Jesus' resurrection on my relationship with God? Here's a second answer.

I MUST BELIEVE IN JESUS' RESURRECTION TO BE MADE RIGHT WITH GOD.

"If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved." (Rom. 10:9-10 NLT) Those are well known and much loved verses. Have you ever considered how they might relate to Jesus' resurrection? Clearly, those verses tell us that my faith must be in Jesus' actual, literal resurrection.

You might wonder why I even bring it up. Isn't it obvious that someone who calls himself or herself a Christian believes in Jesus' resurrection? You would think so, but it's not always the case. Followers of Jesus have always had differences in opinion about what to believe, but not fairly recently in church history did you have a group of people who considered themselves Christians but didn't necessarily believe what happened to Jesus on Easter was a bodily, physical resurrection. These are people who have been influenced by theologically liberal theologians and Bible scholars. They like the Bible, but they don't believe it has any special authority as God's Word to us. They very much like Jesus and some of His teachings, but they don't believe He was God in human flesh. They don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin - believing instead He was simply the illegitimate son of Joseph and Mary. They dismiss the miracles Jesus performed as myths or fables made up by the Gospel writers.

Indeed, anything and everything supernatural is dismissed as being unworthy of people who believe in science and rationality. For that reason, while they believe Jesus died on a cross as a great miscarriage of justice, they try to explain away His resurrection as

yet another myth perpetrated by the first Christians. They ignore the historical fact that no one in the first century believed dead people could come back to life physically – not Jews, not Romans, not Greeks, not anyone. When the first Christians said that Jesus had risen from the dead, they knew perfectly well they were saying something that sounded absolutely absurd and ridiculous to everyone else. But those first followers of Jesus also realized their lives and the future of the world had been radically altered forever by the greatest miracle - the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus.

I've told this story before, but it bears repeating at this very point. The late Christopher Hitchens was a kind of celebrity atheist. As a result of his best known book, "God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything," he toured the country debating religious leaders including well-known Evangelical Christians. There was one remarkable interview, however, with a Unitarian minister named Marilyn Sewell. Early in their conversation, Sewell said, "The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the Scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make any distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?" Now, I vehemently disagree with Christopher Hitchens on just about everything he said or believed, but I am in wholehearted agreement with how he responded to Marilyn Sewell that day. He said, "I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian." Sewell wanted no part of that discussion, so her next words were, "Let me go someplace else." Christopher Hitchens – an atheist – absolutely nailed it.

In our country, people have the right to call themselves anything they want, I suppose. But on the basis of the passage we read a moment ago – "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9 NLT) - I'm happy to go on record as saying that if you can't bring yourself to believe in the actual, literal, physical, and bodily resurrection of Jesus, you are not now - and never will be in any meaningful sense – a Christian. You're just not! You can't genuinely be a follower of Jesus and hold some other theory or explanation. It's never enough just to know Jesus lived 2,000 years ago. You must believe He lives today and forever. It's never enough just to know about Jesus as an historical person. You must come to know Jesus as a living presence.

What's the impact of Jesus' resurrection on my relationship with God? I must have a faith in the actual, literal resurrection of Jesus in order to be made right with God. But, also, my faith must impact every part of my life. "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved." (Rom. 10:9-10 NLT) "Jesus is Lord" was the earliest statement of faith for the first Christians. There's an entire world in that simple confession. It's not just something you say glibly. It's far more than just an assent of your mind or intellect: "Oh, yeah, Jesus the Lord. Nice guy." No. It means Jesus is

God and deserves my worship. It means Jesus is my Master and I am His slave. It means Jesus is uniquely supreme and deserves my loyalty and allegiance. It means Jesus is the center of the universe and everything about my life should revolve around Him like the planets of our solar system revolve around the sun.

Jesus' resurrection isn't just some great historical event in the past. It unleashed a dynamic power which continues to operate in your life and mine as we follow Jesus. For example, because of the resurrection, you and I can truly know Jesus. The power of Jesus' resurrection is tied to it being a literal, historical event. Notice how Paul connected those two things: knowing Jesus and the resurrection. He said, "I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection." (Phil 3:10 NLT) If the resurrection of Jesus never happened - if it's just a lovely myth - then it isn't possible to know or have any kind of relationship with Jesus because He's dead. But He's not dead; He's very much alive. As a result of the resurrection, I can actually know Jesus.

Yeah, but what does it mean to know Jesus? There are some strong similarities to a very close, loving marriage. It's knowing Jesus on a personal and expanding level not just knowing some facts about Him. When you love another person, you discover a place of intimacy and connection. You want to be identified with that person in every way. You even want to share that person's struggles and sufferings to some degree. You share life in every way imaginable. That's possible with Jesus now because of the resurrection. How? As you read and study the Bible, as you learn how to make prayer a conversation with Jesus throughout the day, as you worship Him on Sundays and throughout the week, as you serve with others who know and love Him, as you point people far from God to Jesus both with your lips and your life, as you even suffer persecution and rejection because of your loyalty to Jesus, as you become more and more committed to the things Jesus cares about, you actually come to know Jesus.

Gradually a wonderful transformation takes place. The more you know Him, the more you become like Him. His power becomes your power. His attitudes become your attitudes. His purpose becomes your purpose. His life becomes your life. He is the only inexhaustible person in the universe. You can never know everything about Jesus, but every new discovery is more delightful than the one before it. Knowing some people can be a disappointment – a letdown. That will never happen with Jesus. The greatest thing that had ever happened to Paul – knowing Jesus personally - was made possible by Jesus' resurrection. The same privilege and opportunity is available to you and me.

Sometimes it's a challenge to connect all the dots, I guess. True story. Following an Easter service back in 2003, a woman approached a pastor and asked, "So what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?" "Well, He ascended into heaven and He's still alive," the pastor said. "I know he was resurrected, but He's alive?" she said. "Yes, He's alive." "Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?!" She was truly amazed at this news which sounds so obvious to us. For the next two weeks, this woman telephoned everyone she knew and exclaimed, "Jesus is alive! Did you know He's alive?!" It's easy to write off this dear woman as not being the sharpest knife in the drawer, but I wonder if we, too, have a hard time truly connecting all the dots when it

comes to Jesus resurrection. If Jesus rose from the dead, then He is truly, really alive. Today. Every day. That changes everything. He's the One who made you right with God and He's also the One who keeps you right with God. He's alive! You and I can know Him, love Him, talk to Him, and be led by Him. Do we really get that? The resurrection of Jesus. It's the great essential.