

Resurrection Sunday

Introduction

This is a special day when Christians everywhere, all throughout the world, celebrate the reason for the joy that we have *every* day of the year – and particularly every single Sunday that we gather together as brothers and sisters who have been — *redeemed*. But we also need to admit that on this day of gladness and joy there are *many* who don't actually believe that 2000 years ago a man named Jesus really was physically and bodily raised up from the dead. Perhaps you're here this morning, and that would be you. On the other hand, there are many who would say they do believe the resurrection happened, but aren't really sure what that means, or what it really has to do with them. It's something so far away and so far removed from the affairs of my day to day life that it feels insignificant and mainly irrelevant.

While there *are many* strong historical reasons to believe that the resurrection happened, in the end the strongest and most compelling reason of all is to truly understand what the resurrection *means*. In other words, the strongest and most compelling reason to believe *is* built on faith – not the faith that's a blind leap in the dark, but the faith that's actually 100% certainty. My prayer for you is that by God's grace and working in your heart, before you leave here this morning you'll have this 100% certainty of faith – and the God-honoring, inexpressible joy that's the fruit of this faith.

I. The Work of God's Law Written on the Heart

At some point or another, we've all learned by experience what a "guilty conscience" is. We might think of the conscience as that little voice inside of us that tells us *this* is the right thing to do or *that's* the wrong thing to do. The *guilty* conscience, then, is that voice inside that's accusingly pointing the finger at us and telling us, "You did wrong and now you're in trouble." We've all known that feeling at one point or another, haven't we?—From the time that we were little and first snuck the proverbial cookie from the cookie jar?

A guilty conscience is a *miserable* thing. **No one** wants a voice inside them constantly accusing them and condemning them. And so we've become highly adept at developing coping mechanisms, or even ways of muffling or silencing the voice of a guilty conscience. I make excuses: It wasn't really my fault... I can't really be held responsible for that... I was influenced by others or by my environment... I really had no other choice. I compare ourselves to others: *Compared to that person and those words and those actions*, I really have nothing to feel guilty about. I minimize the seriousness of my wrong choices: It's really not *that* big of a deal. I distract myself with other things—with the busyness and the pleasures of life—so that eventually I'm numbed to those pangs of conscience. They're still there, but I no longer feel them or pay attention to them. Finally, I can even work to redefine right and wrong – I tell myself that the guilt I've been feeling is actually just a *false* guilt.

But are you seeing how this leads to a *really, really* serious problem? We become so skilled at manipulating and ultimately silencing our conscience that it no longer serves as the warning that

it should. Instead of condemning and accusing us and warning us that we're in trouble, we may even succeed at times in getting our own conscience to defend us and to excuse us and to tell us that we're really alright and there's really nothing to worry about. **No one** wants a voice inside them pointing the finger and condemning and accusing. But what if that voice was telling the truth? When we get too close to the heat of the fire, do we really want to manipulate the message our nervous system sends to our brain so that it actually tells us everything's alright? It's true we may no longer feel the heat, but we're still going to be burned nonetheless. When I succeed in silencing my conscience, or manipulating my conscience into saying what I want it to say, *am I really* doing myself any favors? What will the consequences be?

But now let's take a step back and see what we've really been saying. What does this constant activity of accusing *or excusing* reveal? Why are we always instinctively doing this? This constant habit of accusing or excusing demands the idea of "law." If there were no law there would be no standard by which to accuse or excuse – both would be impossible. But then we have to take it one step further: Since these activities of accusing and excusing are things in which we're **all** engaged **instinctively** and **by nature**, they demand the reality not just of any law, but of the law of God; furthermore, they demand the reality that the work of *this* Law has been written on the hearts of every single one of us. We might not have a copy of the law of God written down and hanging on our walls at home, and growing up we might never have had the Law of God taught or explained to us, but every single one of us are born into this world with an innate awareness of God's own unchanging, absolute standard of right and wrong. We cannot escape this. The Apostle Paul says:

- Romans 2:14–15 — When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature [instinctively] do the things that the law does [accusing and excusing], they are the law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or even excusing them.

God has hardwired *His* law as the standard of right and wrong into our very nature and being. God did this when He created *us* in *His own* image and after *His own* likeness.

- Genesis 1:26–27 — Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Truly, as human beings we are by the very nature of our existence accountable and answerable to God. Not only are we *His* creation, but we have the work of His law—the law of our Creator—written on our hearts. But now our *guilty* conscience and our *accusing* thoughts are a constant reminder that we've broken that law (cf. 1 Jn. 3:4). Even when we're busily engaged in defending and excusing ourselves (or defending and accusing others!), we're only further establishing our accountability to that law and further revealing that we're *all*, at the end of the day, law-breakers. That's *what* we are. It's what you are; It's what I am.

But does this concern us? Does this cause us to tremble? Or do we still go on working to silence our conscience – making excuses, comparing ourselves with others, distracting ourselves with

earthly, temporal pursuits, even seeking to redefine right and wrong? No one wants a guilty conscience. But what do we really accomplish by working so hard to make this voice go away – as we have *all* done? Just because we don't feel guilty doesn't mean we aren't guilty. The question *cannot* and *must not* be how I feel, but, what does the Law say, and what will the verdict be on that final day. The writer of Hebrews reminds us:

- Hebrews 4:12–13 — The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Ever since the beginning, the penalty for breaking **God's law** has been death; not just physical death, but a spiritual death – being separated forever from the light and joy of God's presence in the everlasting torments and fires of hell.

- Genesis 2:16–17 — The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
- James 1:14–15 — Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
- Romans 6:23 — The wages of sin is death.

How I feel can never determine the truth; instead, isn't it the truth that should determine how I feel?

II. The Law of God Written on Tablets of Stone

Left to ourselves, all we will *ever* do—*instinctively*—is suppress the truth that we know deep down inside (cf. Rom. 1:18-20). All we will *ever* do—*instinctively*—is work to silence our conscience and manipulate it into telling us what we *want* to hear. That's what we do. We endeavor constantly to override the work of the Law written on our hearts. And so when God, in His mercy and grace, called a people out of this world to save and deliver them from coming wrath and judgment, the first thing He did was to take the work of the Law that was written on their hearts and give it to them on tablets of stone. *Why* did God do this? *Why* were the Ten Commandments written down on tablets of stone? The Apostle Paul answers:

- Romans 7:7–13 (cf. Rom. 5:20) — If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to

me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

God didn't give His people the Law written on tablets of stone so they could congratulate themselves on being "good enough." God gave His people the law in order that their sin might be **shown to be** sin, and through the commandment might become sinful "beyond measure." Paul says that the tenth commandment, "you shall not covet," produced in him "**all kinds** of covetousness." There's the "kind" of covetousness that leads to anger in the heart (which is the root of murder; 1 Jn. 3:15; James 4:2; Mat. 5:21-22); there's the "kind" of covetousness that leads to lust in the heart (which is the root of adultery; Mat. 5:27-28); there's the "kind" of covetousness that leads to selfishness and stinginess in the heart (which is the root of theft; Eph. 4:28); and there's the "kind" of covetousness that leads to slandering and lying. Paul had coveted *before*, but now in the face of the commandment, that covetousness, as it were, **came alive** and *he* died. He was a guilty, condemned lawbreaker. The tenth commandment of God's Law ("You shall not covet"), addresses our heart, and so it reveals that the previous nine commandments, too, are concerned **not** just with our outward actions but with our heart (Mat. 22:36-40). James says:

- James 2:8-10 — If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

All of the commandments are ultimately the summation of one law; the heart that's broken just one commandment is the heart that's broken the **whole** law. If we are ever to be saved, then we must come to see and acknowledge our guilt. The question *cannot* and *must not* be how much shame or guilt I feel, but what does the Law *say*? **I** must come to tremble at the reality of that guilty verdict that will be pronounced over me after the word of God, which is sharper than any two-edged sword, has discerned and exposed—even to me—all the thoughts and intentions of my heart.

- Romans 3:20 — By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.
- Romans 2:12 — All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

What, then, are guilty, law-breaking sinners like us to do? As the Philippian jailor asked: What must I do to be saved (Acts 16:30)?

III. Why the Resurrection *Had* to Happen

God is a righteous judge who will pour out His wrath on sinners and lawbreakers.

- Romans 1:18 — The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

And yet in His **great love**, God has provided a way for a guilty lawbreaker like me and a guilty lawbreaker like you to be *saved* – to be **wholly delivered** from this wrath to come. We said at the beginning that there are *many* strong historical reasons to believe that the resurrection happened, but in the end the strongest and most compelling reason of all is to truly understand *why* it happened – why it *had* to happen. In other words, the strongest and most compelling reason to believe the historical fact of the resurrection is built on **faith** – the faith that believes and understands that the resurrection **had** to happen because we’ve believed and understood what the resurrection **means**. What is the meaning of the resurrection? Why did it have to happen? The Apostle Paul writes:

- Galatians 4:4–5 — When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth **his Son**, born of woman, **born under the law**, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Jesus was born “under the law” just like all of us, and yet He alone, of all the people who have ever walked this earth, was *not* a lawbreaker.

- John 4:34; 5:30; 14:31; 8:46 — Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.... I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father... Which one of you convicts me of sin?”

So what does it mean when *this* Jesus, this holy Son of God, is hung up to die on a cross? What does it mean when *this* Jesus cries out in physical *and spiritual* torment on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mat. 27:46) What does that *mean*? The Scriptures explain:

- Galatians 3:10–13 — All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

The prophet Isaiah wrote some seven hundred years before the sufferings of Christ – on behalf of all true believers:

- Isaiah 53:4–6 — Surely he has borne our diseases and carried our pains [the curse of the law]... he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Do you see now why the resurrection *had* to happen? Do you see now what the resurrection *means*? It *means* that because Jesus suffered the full curse of the law not for His lawlessness, but for the lawlessness of hell-deserving sinners like you and me, death—in the end—had no rightful claim on Him. I recently read this quote: “No tomb could contain what love was about to release.” Yes, it was infinite love that sent Jesus to the cross, but be assured that it was *not* love that “released” Jesus from the tomb. Instead, we ought to say, “No tomb could contain what divine justice and righteousness was about to release.” *Because* God is just, and holy, and righteous, *therefore* on the third day, as the Apostle Peter says:

- Acts 2:24 — God raised Jesus up, loosing the pangs of death, because **it was not possible** for him to be held by it.
- Romans 6:9 — We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Here, then, we have revealed to us—as it could be in no other way—the greatness, and the power, and the majesty of God!

Conclusion

- Matthew 28:1–10 — Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

The physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus some 2000 years ago in the land of Israel is not a fiction or a fairy tale; *neither* is it just a curious oddity of history. We *believe* that the resurrection *happened* not ultimately on the grounds of historical evidence (though there is an abundance of this), but because we understand from the Word of God *why* the resurrection *had* to happen. We have come to understand, by faith, what it means. And so we see that this faith is no blind leap in the dark, but 100% certainty – a 100% certainty that results in 100%, deep down, abiding peace and joy.

No one wants a guilty conscience. No one wants a voice inside them pointing the finger – always accusing and always condemning. But what do we really accomplish by working so hard to make this voice go away? Remember, the question *cannot* and *must not* be whether I feel guilty, but “what does the Law say, and what will the verdict be on that final day?” There’s only one way to

a clean conscience; there's only one way to be delivered from the wrath to come — and that's to **confess our guilt** and **trust wholly in Christ**—crucified, buried, and raised up from the dead.

- Galatians 3:19, 22 — Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions... The [law] imprisoned everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.
- Romans 10:9–13 — If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and [Gentile]; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Have you called upon the name of the Lord? Are you, *today*, one who is calling upon His name by faith? *Will* you, today? To all who have, listen to these wonderful words that Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

- 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 — You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.
But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable,
always abounding in the work of the Lord,
knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.
(1 Corinthians 15:56–58)