

Part 32: Reason and the Resurrection

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The other day I was at home working on something in the house, and my daughter was talking to me. It's probably not a secret, but kids, there are sometimes when we look like we are paying attention—but we're not. As I was trying to multitask, here's what I thought I heard her say: "If you use an erasable pen, and erase the ink, you can put it in the freezer and the ink will reappear."

Being a man of science, I said, "Wait, what?" Five seconds ago I was concerned about the real mattering things of life, but that claim couldn't be ignored. I needed to hear more. And skeptically, self-righteously, and with reluctant curiosity—I asked her to prove it.

I wonder if you've ever had, "Wait, what?" moments like that? Those kind of moments capture our interest and, depending upon their claims, demand our involvement or investigation.

We've been studying a book of the Bible called the book of Acts—it records for us what happened after Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The idea of Jesus' resurrection to us, as modern people, is to be expected. Today, after all is "Resurrection Sunday." You'd probably find it a little weird if Jesus' resurrection was never mentioned.

But the idea of a resurrection is the "Wait, what?" moment in our passage today. The Apostle Paul has been bringing the message of the gospel into Europe and today he finds himself in Athens where the brightest and most inquisitive minds are stumped at Paul's claims. My hope is to make all of us have a similar encounter with Jesus and the resurrection.

If you're a Christian in here today this passage reminds us how disruptive faith in a resurrected Lord is to your life. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was not something you believe about how you enter eternal life—the resurrection is something that changes how you live in this life. So much so, that he says later on that if the resurrection isn't true—then Christians are of all people most to be pitied. That should make even the most mature among us say, "Wait, what?" Resurrection life affects our immediate life.

If you're not a Christian in here today—my guess is that central to that unbelief is the outrageous claim of the resurrection. Dead people don't rise. Dead things don't live. But Paul's argument in this piece should make you say, "Wait, what?" Because at the end of the day his argument goes like this: If we are reasonable enough to admit that dead things don't come back to life—then certainly you're reasonable enough to believe dead things can't give life. But, Paul would have you consider how your life and your hope might be out of line with that belief. There are three categories of things in this world: dirt, dying and dead. Yet somehow we think we can look to those things and expect them to give us life—or grant to us the assurance that we have a good life.

Paul's main argument today is simple—and it's our main idea this morning: **Living things give life.** And if the God who is the source of life, sent his own Son to die and rise so that we might have life—if that is true—then that changes things.

In looking at Paul's affections and his argument we will see how the reality of the resurrection changes how we view three things. First we will see how it changes our view of **The Life of Others**, then he will expose **Lifeless Idols**, and lastly he shows us the resurrection as **Living Proof**.

A central character in our history today is the city of Athens itself. The ruins of the Athens Paul once visited still draws countless people each year to Greece to see them. Kids, after church today, ask your parents to show you pictures of Athens online—you can even see the very Areopagus which we read of today.

But as impressive as its ruins are now—imagine the glory of Athens in Paul's day. It was the cultural center of the world. Rome was the power, but Athens was the pizzazz. Think of it as a mixture of the culture of New York and the extravagant fanfare of Las Vegas.

The port Paul's ship would have landed in would have revealed to him the glory of the city, and caused him to walk down roads lined with the most famous sites, temples and markets. If there were Instagram back then—we all would have been posting the beauty of the city on our walk.

But notice how different Paul's response was: **Acts 17:16**, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." As Paul stood gazing at Athens, it was to him as if he was standing in the lost city of Atlantis. Behind the veneer of life he saw a city submerged in death.

This is our first point today: **The Life of Others**.

Paul was not a curmudgeon focused on the slow rural life. Paul's affections were grieved because he knew that behind the hustle, bustle, and beauty of life stood the reality of eternal life and death. And these people—were so happy and so satisfied with earthly glory—that they were blind to the reality of their own dire need.

Resurrection life puts this life into perspective. You can be happy and suffering free in this life and suffer tragically and eternally in the next. Paul looks at the beauty of Athens, the happiness of her citizens, the wealth of her riches—and he is devastated because of the empty hope of idols.

Dear Christian, be careful because the resurrection might ruin your vacations.

If you go back and watch the Beijing Olympics, you'll notice some shots where the background is filled with this beautiful painting on a massive wall. Do you know why? It's because the Chinese government wanted to cover up the parts of Beijing which are impoverished, uncared for, and unsightly. They knew that if the world saw the living conditions that they allowed their citizens to live in—it might ruin their leisure. It's hard to comfortably enjoy the elegance of the Olympics when you see citizens fighting for life itself.

It's not hard in our own lives as Christians to put those kinds of walls up everywhere. We see our co-workers, neighbors and friends—and they look like a happy painting. Why would I feel compelled to share the gospel with them—things seem to be going well? They are happy, they've got good jobs, they are nice people. And I'm sure they are!

Yet the Bible tells us that those lovely people—are also lost people. When the wall of death comes down we will see how unhappy they are, and how unloving we were to not be concerned with them.

Dear Christian, if the promise of God is real for you unto salvation, then the punishment of sin is real to others unto damnation. I say this as someone who admittedly loves staring at the walls. I'm content with the false contentment of so many people.

But here's the "wait, what" moment—if we believe we need salvation because all of sinned, and if we believe that salvation is from God by grace alone—and yet if we are unwilling to think other people need or would respond to that same message of grace—what do you really believe?

Does your sin damn you, but theirs doesn't? Is the idea of hell uncomfortable for you, but fine for them? Do you think you were wiser than them—and they wouldn't understand? Do you think you were more deserving than them—and they aren't good enough?

The message of grace in the gospel is that none of us were deserving and yet at some point someone preached the message of the gospel to us and by God's grace, the walls came down. Someone saw your spiritual death—and risked it all to share Jesus with you.

May the gospel ruin our vacations—and show us the work that matters because we live, love, and like people who matter. May God grant us, may he grant me, the same affection Paul has when he speaks of his fellow unbelieving Jews and says, “, **Romans 9:3**, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

That is intense. But it is also impossible. You cannot die for the salvation of someone else. You can't trade your salvation for theirs. Now, I want to get ahead though of what you might be thinking, "Well, what can I do? Am I just to be miserable and burdened in light of the world's lostness?" I actually want to say, "Yes!" The glory of God, the salvation of souls, is of greater value than your temporary emotional comfort! Might we throw our own idol of comfort out the window!

But there's a difference. We are not to despair. Why? Because we can do something about it. There's lots of bad things in this world that we are burdened with but that we can do nothing about. But as quickly as we are grieved at the lostness of those around us—just as quickly we give the message that saves. Paul was unhappy—but he wasn't unable to help. Look at what follows: **Acts 17:17-18**, "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babblers wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" because he was teaching Jesus and the resurrection."

Dear Christians, if the resurrection is real—then eternal life is real. And so are the souls all around us. So let us find our comfort not in the false wall of worldly happiness—but let us wrestle with the goodness and glory of God as we preach the message of Jesus which saved us---to those who still need it.

But this message, which sounds weird today, sounded weird back then to. Some of the philosophers said, "Wait, what?" What do you mean of this Jesus and the resurrection business? We read this: **Acts 17:19-21**, "And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know

therefore what these things mean.’ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”

Athens, as Luke tells us, was no stranger to religions. In fact one historian said that the city had more gods than men—and that’s closer to truth than exaggeration. The contemplation on the good life—was not only a philosophical debate—it was the hobby of the day. These men, brought Paul to the Areopagus because despite the diversity of Athens—there was an informal court that gathered there. They had the power to approve which foreign divinities” to be added to the cultural menu. In fact, earlier on in history Socrates stood before this same council and was put to death for his teachings. And now Paul, was dragged before this group of men and given the stage and told: “Tell us what you’ve got.”

And here we see our next point: **Lifeless Idols.**

From the hill he was taken to, he could look out again over the splendor of Athens, and with that in the background he masterfully reveals the inconsistencies of the Athenian’s hearts.

Acts 17:22-23, “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’”

This—first of all—is a masterclass in rhetoric. Standing in the center of philosophical wisdom—God’s wisdom was being reasonably brought to bear.

First, Paul appeals to the obvious: “You’re very religious.” He proves this by pointing out the sheer amount of idols, images, and objects inside the city. No one had more gods, altars, idols, images, or objects than the Athenians. They were everywhere. It was their occupation, it was their joy, and yet notice how despite all they had it failed to be their concrete hope.

We can think of idols as outdated or obsolete—but for this culture there was nothing more relevant to the good life than this. And Paul is saying, “You think you have it all figured out—you’re sacrificing your time to Athena, your money to Zeus, your vocation to Poseidon and yet you still are worried you’re missing something.” He points out their own experience and says, “You yourselves admit that despite all you have—you don’t have enough.” And here he points to an altar he saw addressed to “an unknown god.” Despite all they did—there was a sense they didn’t do enough. There was this catch-all god who they hoped would fill in the gaps.

Then he says, “That which you worship as unknown, I declare to you.” What’s really important here is that Paul is not claiming to introduce a new god. Instead—he’s masterfully introducing *the* God. He says, “You’re all striving for something—but let me tell you who it is that you are looking for.” Everything they were looking for in a buffet of hopes and idols was only actually found in one place—and if they didn’t listen—they’d never be content.

We do the same things today—all of us are Athenians—our idols just look different. We don’t worship the goddess of fertility—but if we can get enough kids and have the best family vacations we will be good and happy as a family. I don’t worship Nike, but if we could just get that new pair of shoes, that new home, that new car—I’d be content. We don’t worship Eros, but if we could just find love—we could finally rest. But there’s always another altar isn’t there.

Even when you get it, you feel there's got to be something else. How many times did we as kids say, "If I could just get that toy—I'd have everything." Only to be burdened and discontent when the new version came out.

An idol is anything that captures our hopes, our possessions, and our purpose and says, "If you give to me—I will give you what you want. If you have me, you'll be secure, safe and satisfied." We are more modern—but we are just as idolatrous. We all live out of a belief system somewhere, and we do things because we believe it will give us life, better our life, or satisfy our life. But history has shown that the things of this world generally fail to do that.

In fact, when the French Philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1800s he was struck at the unprecedented prosperity, security and comfort and yet he recounted, "a strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants in the midst of abundance." He went on to conclude, "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy the heart."

The things of this world—the dirt, the dead, and they dying—cannot give us the life we want. So far, even those who died happiest in life—still died. And death isn't a problem for you—then you can't assume life has any purpose. It's an unfortunate—but consistent conclusion.

But guess what? Everything we've search for and desired—Paul is about to declare to us. If we haven't found life in the dirty, dying and dead things of the world—then what if we considered the fact that the Bible claims there's an eternal God who created it.

That's where he goes next. This is our final point this morning: **Living Proof**.

Paul continues and is even going to quote their own philosophers to make his point: **Acts 17:24-29**, "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for, 'In him we live and move and have our being'; even as some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man."

So, here's Paul's argument in short: You worship a bunch of things, and you seem unhappy with all of them. But that's because there is one God and two categories: The one God is the God of the Bible and the categories are the creator of life, and creation.

Because God is the creator—he doesn't need you. You don't need to try and please God through offerings and sacrifices because he doesn't need them. You can't manipulate his favor because he has no needs. Instead, you need him. And you know you need him because he made us to seek him.

Now you might say, "What do you mean? I'm made to seek God?" Well, did your momma ever tell you that you're special? She's right. But why are you special—here's why. Because we are made in God's image. Have you ever noticed that despite the amazing artists that have lived in human history—we still have to offer art appreciation classes in college. But no one has to take a sunset appreciation class.

Our bodies and our affections were made naturally to be stirred and drawn into something outside ourselves. But be careful—Paul says next—because what’s outside of us that we need cannot be things that we create. Because we are made in the image of God, because we are drawn up for something more—we can’t actually think that created things can satisfy us. It won’t work—you were made for more.

But here’s the problem: you were made to seek him, but you’re not. He’s not far from you. He’s not hiding—he’s actually quite near to you. The argument Paul makes is not that we can’t see him—it’s that our hearts refuse to see him. That’s what sin does—it blinds us the life itself. Paul says in Romans 1, you’ve exchanged the truth for a lie—exchanging the glory of the invisible God for images of birds and creeping things.

And yet while we were content with images, idols and incomplete hopes—God took action. He spoke, he sent his Son. The times of ignorance are now gone because God revealed himself in flesh and blood. Because we wouldn’t look up—he came down. And now we read this: **Acts 17:30-31**, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

“Wait, what?”

If we were made to find our life, true life, in God and our service and worship of him—and if our pursuit of other things was really a rebellion of worship—then we need to repent. That’s the message. Why? Because it is not by an ambiguous standard that a “good life” will be judged. It’s by God’s standard. And he will judge the world in perfect just judgement by his Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, you might say, why does that matter? That seems like religious jargon that doesn’t really matter today. Well, if living things give life, then this matters.

Jesus, if what the Bible says is true, is not dead. He is risen from the dead. This, Paul says is for assurance to all. Assurance of what? Assurance to those who continue in blindness that you will be judged and that everything you thought would bring you life—doesn’t survive. It will not speak in your defense. It will not save you. The grave doesn’t care about how many gold stars you had in school, or gold bars you had in the bank, or notches you had on your bedpost. What’s dead offers nothing. And if you stand before Jesus—if he’s real—then you’re really in trouble.

But it’s also an assurance for those who repent. Because while your bank account, your family portrait, and your portfolio can’t give you life. Jesus can. Jesus can speak for you—he will give you his righteousness. He will give you his life because you gave him your sin—that’s what faith is. Faith that Jesus takes our sinful death, and gives us his perfect life.

Now, look at the responses we see next: **Acts 17:32-34**, “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

I know there are some people today who hear this and they laugh like some of these did. To be honest, if I didn't grow up in the church—I'd probably mock it to. Some of you might be intrigued—and want to know more. But don't be too content in your waiting. You too find yourself in the "dying" category.

Because don't get me wrong—death will prove us right or wrong. You can choose to say, "I'm pretty convinced that when we die, we die, and therefore the best life is the life we can make it now." That's fine. Death will prove you right, or me wrong. You can wait it out and find out. But the Christian has the wonderful position of saying, "Death's already proved it."

Jesus rose. He is alive.

Guess what? When I took that piece of paper out of the freezer—the ink came back. I'm telling you—with my own eyes—if you go buy an erasable pen, erase it, and put it in the freezer it will come back.

And if you are willing to believe me—consider not only did the God of life send his Son so that we might find our life in him—not only did he raise him from the dead—but people saw it. Lots of people actually.

And without seeing it, Paul believed it, so did Dionysius, so did Damaris. So did I. And while I can't tell you I've seen the resurrected Jesus—I can tell you I don't need another altar. So to the believer—do you live in light of this resurrection hope? To the skeptic and to the seeker—could I persuade you to seek Christ? Would you take him at his word—take the church at her witness—and take Christ by faith and repentance?