

The Joy of Hopelessness?

Easter 2001

With Study Questions

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I. Fighting For Hopelessness

A Sour Victory

I used to coach college sports. Periodically I had spiritual dialogues with the athletes on my teams. I remember one particular ongoing dialogue with a young athlete regarding the Christian faith. One day he excitedly stomped into the gym, prior to practice, to continue the discussion with some new found evidence. Apparently there had been some astronomical discovery that, once and for all, disproved the veracity of the Christian faith.

I decided, just for a moment, to disregard the normal course of the discussion which would be for me to question the dubious nature of scientific discoveries and the questionable conclusions derived thereof!¹ There was something else that struck me—how excited he was. So I asked him, “Why are you so excited to discover that you have no hope?” He was visibly taken aback.

Recently I went to a debate between a theist and an atheist. When the atheist would make a point I noticed the heads of the atheists in the audience excitedly nodding with approval. What if all Christendom simply threw in the towel and acknowledged that the atheists were right? Maybe the atheists would have a big party. Maybe there would be music, dancing, and drinking.

But after the thrill of the victory was over and the vast majority of the party had gone home, imagine the last two atheists finishing their drinks at 2:00 AM. Of what would their conversation consist? Maybe something like, “The victory was sweet. It felt good to finally win, and silence those sanctimonious, pious, religious zealots.” But he might take just one more drink and lament, “But I would have preferred to have found out we were wrong.”

Spirit of Twisted Thinking

The sentiment in these examples doesn't prove anything. But I do think it is significant to observe that the thinking, or the forces, that take rank against Biblical Christianity are so twisted, that there is actually an excitement attached to the prospect of merely dying and becoming worm fodder. Darwinian bumper stickers, anti-Christian rhetoric on television talk shows and the wholesale denial of the truths of the Holy Scriptures in every possible venue, not only abound, but abound with excitement.

It is tantamount to being excited to find out you have cancer or that your house is built on a toxic waste site. If the Christian faith is false (something, by

¹ I understand the Hubble telescope has already overturned the aforementioned discovery.

the way, that cannot possibly be proved), it would make sense that it isn't something to be excited about. But the fact that there is a spirit working in the minds of men which not only turns them from the cross of Christ, but makes men ecstatic about the prospect of hopelessness, should be a clue to us of the false and twisted nature of this kind of thinking.

II. A Sermon to Skeptics

Truth Itself

Biblical Christianity, of course, is not false. And to say that it is true is somewhat of an understatement. It is more than true. It is truth itself. People ask me how I know the Bible is true. In return I ask what they would like me to offer as proof. Think hard about that question, for it will reveal a great deal to you about yourself. It will tell you where you place your faith. It will tell you where you place any chance for the survival of your soul. Apart from the Scriptures themselves every answer to that question can be, and has been, shown to be doubtful.

No Resurrection—No Hope

The hope of the Christian, however, is not doubtful. And gathering on such a day as this, we recognize the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the fundamental truth of the gospel. The Apostle Paul writes of a Christian faith devoid of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁴ And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty. ¹⁵ Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. ¹⁶ For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁷ And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸ Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable (1 Corinthians 15:13-19).

If there is no resurrection of Jesus Christ all the sermons ever given are empty, faith is futile and empty, the apostles are all false witnesses, sin is victorious over men, those who died professing faith in Christ have perished and truly Christians are the most pitiable people on the face of the earth. Some hold all these assertions to be true. Perhaps this is you. But I would beg you not to be deluded into thinking that by rejecting the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ that you have subdued the high intellectual ground.

An Authentic Fact

Not only do those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ exult in hopelessness, they exult in error as well. Charles Hodge in his great systematic theology written between 1871-1873 penned these words concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

It may be safely asserted that the resurrection of Christ is at once the most important, and the best authenticated fact in the history of the world.²

Hodge mentions ten reasons that I will briefly repeat: (1) It was predicted in the Old Testament. (2) It was foretold by Christ himself. (3) It was an easily verified event. (4) It was substantiated by abundant, suitable, and frequently repeated evidence. (5) There were numerous, competent witnesses of the event. (6) The conviction of the witnesses was testified by their willingness to suffer even to the point of death. (7) God confirmed the testimony of those who witnessed by signs and wonders seen by entire communities. (8) I will save this for last. (9) The fact of the resurrection has been commemorated by a religious observance of the first day of the week from the time it happened until this present time. (10) The effects produced by the gospel admit of no other rational solution than the truth of Christ's death and subsequent resurrection. The Christian church is His monument. All believers are His witnesses.

The truth of the gospel, the resurrection, in fact all of Scripture, can and always has, passed the test of every and any legitimate method of scrutiny it has been placed under. The real question is, "how legitimate are the methods?" Using man-made disciplines and evidences to determine the authenticity of Scripture would be quite like using my Casio to determine whether the atomic clock is giving the right time.

Assuming it False

The reason I saved number eight for last is because all of the others can, and will, be dismissed by those who merely choose to reject the entire notion of Biblical Christianity. Appealing to the Old Testament or the words of Christ or historical evidences means nothing to people who start with an initial assumption that it is all false. They will simply interpret these facts through their own grid. If, for example, my assumption is that people simply cannot come back to life, no matter how much testimony, facts and authentication you give me I will never yield to the assertion that I have already deemed impossible.

² Hodge's Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, pp. 626.

Lazarus

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus tells of a rich man who lived in plenty and a poor man named Lazarus who lived in poverty. They both died. The rich man went to Hell and Lazarus to Heaven. We then listen in on a dialogue from eternity. The rich man makes an appeal to Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house, for he had five brothers he was hoping would escape the place of torment. Abraham had an interesting response. He said, **"They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them."**³ To which the rich man said, **"No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent."** Finally Abraham gives a reply we must all heed. He said, **"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."** In other words, if they don't believe the Scriptures, no sign, no evidence, no facts, no matter how miraculous or substantial will persuade them. They simply have hardened their hearts to the truth. Again, if this is you, I plead with you as the author of Hebrews pleads, **"Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion" (Hebrews 3:15).**

III. Hodge's Eighth Point

This brings us to Hodge's eighth point. Number eight maintains that the testimony of the Spirit is the means by which men have access to the truth. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth in the heart and conscience. Or to put it in Biblical terms, **"The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16).** This is not, by the way, a feeling or a burning in the bosom, but a knowing.

This fact, my friends, is undeniable. It is the very starting place of truth. I preach this sermon as to skeptics. The Spirit of God reveals to us that Jesus Christ, as He is revealed in God's word, is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the beginning and the end of truth. Granting Jesus Christ as the beginning and the end of truth is the only way to make sense of everything in between.

IV. The Significance of the Resurrection

Single Greatest Event

And the apex of this truth—the absolute pinnacle of the message found in the Scriptures is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To seek to give a full-orbed presentation of the resurrection this morning would be like trying to squeeze the works of Shakespeare into a thimble. The resurrection is, or should be, the culmination of every sermon and the discovery and hope of every Bible study.

³ Moses and the prophets would be the Scriptures.

Nonetheless let us pull our widest paintbrush from our scabbard and draw a brief portrait of the significance of the single greatest event in the history of the planet.

Literal and Physical

The resurrection was literal and physical. It has been posited that the resurrection was merely an ideal, the way we might describe someone coming out of depression or severe illness. I've been to many a memorial service where it is said that so-and-so, though dead, lives on in our hearts. But to understand the resurrection of Christ this way is to cast an aspersion on the Scriptures, which clearly teach of a physical resurrection. It also reduces the person and work of Jesus to that of any inspirational, famous, or well-loved person who has urged us to greater productivity or serenity. It is said of Elvis that he lives. If Elvis does live, it certainly isn't in the same sense as Jesus.

Jesus Raised Himself Eternally

The resurrection was not merely Jesus coming back to life. We read of a number of people in the Scriptures who died and were brought back to life. The resurrection of Jesus differs from these in at least two ways: Jesus, working in unison with the Father and the Spirit, brought Himself back to life.

“Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. ¹⁸No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father” (John 10:17,18).

Secondly, all the people who were brought back to life would die again. Not so with Jesus. The resurrection was not coming back to life merely to die again, but to a life immortal and incorruptible.

Demonstrated Power Over Death

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a demonstration of His power over death itself. His victory wasn't merely metaphor or allegory. Everything Jesus did and said was validated when, in a hitherto unknown demonstration of power, He conquered mankind's greatest enemy.

Raised For Our Justification

In Romans, Paul writes that Jesus was raised for our justification. The resurrection of Jesus was the public declaration of the Father's acceptance of the work of Christ. Furthermore it is the resurrected and ascended Jesus who, as our High Priest, presents His own justifying, atoning blood before the Father. A dead savior would, not only be a lying savior, but one incapable of standing before God the Father pleading the case of His brothers by virtue of His own sacrificial payment.

With this in mind Jesus must be viewed either as a dead, impotent liar, incapable of saving even Himself, or the Living Savior who has conquered death and grants the same resurrection to those who call on His name. This leads me to my final point. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 writes,

But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Closer Than a Brother/Apricot Tree

Jesus Christ condescended to humanity in the genuine sense that he considered humanity his brothers (Hebrews 2:11). The sense of this brotherhood goes much deeper than any human understanding of the word. The union believers have with Christ is indivisible. The good news to those who call upon the name of the Lord is "where He goes—we go."

Speaking of Christ's resurrection Paul calls Him the firstfruits. I once lived in a house that had an apricot tree in the front yard. As the apricots would ripen I would literally sit in crook of the tree and eat the fruit directly off the branches. If the firstfruits were delicious, which they were, I knew that I would have a season of feasting, for the fruits that followed would be succulent as well.

Firstfruits

I have always been under the impression that if something is universally true, it must have universal application. Often times the Christian faith is presented as a means to help us through difficulty. It is heralded as a way to alleviate our sorrow, or loneliness, or aid in our marriages or business. But these general issues in humanity don't always apply individually. Some people are happy. But everybody, without exception, dies. And this final enemy is sufficiently vanquished only by Christ.

Paul likens the resurrection of Jesus to firstfruits. There would be fruit to follow. The resurrection of Jesus Christ would, and has through history, yielded a rich harvest of saints. Saints who, when they leave this life and shed this old, corruptible man, will put on a new incorruptible, eternal, glorious man. This life is given to all whom, by the grace of God, repent, and call upon the name of the

Lord. It is my prayer that all who hear this message would be in that number. As Jesus said to Martha, **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”**

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose people can be so excited about the idea of the gospel being false (pages 2,3).
2. What do people desire to have as proof of the truth of Christianity? To what extent are these proofs legitimate (page 3) ?
3. What is the fundamental truth of the gospel (page 3)?
4. What are the implications of there being no resurrection (page 3)?
5. Discuss the authenticity of the resurrection according to Hodge's reasons (page 4).
6. What is Hodge's eighth point and what does it maintain (page 5)?
7. Discuss the significance of the resurrection (pages 5-7).
8. In what respects is Jesus the firstfruits (page 7)?
9. How is the gospel universal in its application (page 7)?