

INTRODUCTION

Open your hearts and open your minds for the next 25 minutes to receive this truth.

Romans 1:1-6. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God." Now, we're going to be talking about the gospel. "The gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ."

1. THE REALITY OF JESUS

(1) Do you believe Jesus really lived in the flesh?

I want to talk about the reality of Jesus Christ. I want to ask you three questions about Jesus and see if you can say, "Yes, this is what I believe." Number one: Do you believe Jesus really lived in the flesh? Verse 3 is talking about his human nature and how he was a descendant of David. That means there was a man who lived in the flesh whose name was Jesus. That's where you have to start. All of you have to decide if there was really an historical character named Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, had an itinerant ministry for three and a half years and was then crucified. Do you really think there actually was an historical character? There are still some today who insist Jesus never existed. It's like Hercules or like Jack and the Beanstalk. He's some mythological character, a fairy tale. When you start asking the question, "Was there really a Jesus?" you have to say, "Do we read about Jesus anywhere other than the Bible? I know you say it's in the Bible, but I personally do not believe the Bible." You have to consider the evidence. There are a number of extra biblical references to Jesus; it's in other writers' works. In the year 90 A.D. a Jewish historian named Josephus who was not a Christian, he was just writing history, wrote: "Now, there was a man named Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such truth that men received it with pleasure. He drew over to himself many Jews and many Gentiles. He was Christ, and when Pilate at the suggestion of the principal men among us condemned him to the cross, those who loved him from the first did not forsake him. For he appeared to them, restored to life For the divine prophets had foretold these and other wonderful things about him and the tribe of Christians so named for him are not extinct to this day."

This Jewish historian says there was a man named Jesus who was crucified and his followers said he came back from the dead. Some of you who enjoy studying Greek literature will recognize the name of Lucian of Samosata. He was a Greek writer and he didn't like Christians. In fact, he was hostile to Christians. About fifty years later, this is what he wrote in a letter: "The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day. The distinguished person who introduced their novel rights, and he was crucified on that account. It was impressed upon these Christians by their original lawmaker that they are all brothers from the moment that they are converted, and they deny the gods of Greece. They worship their crucified sage and live after his laws."

These are writers outside of the Bible who said, "Yes, there was a man named Jesus." So that's where it starts. Do you believe there really was a guy walking around named Jesus?

(2) Do you believe Jesus really died on a cross?

Secondly, do you believe Jesus really died on a cross? It's one thing to say he lived, but do you really think he died? History tells us even outside the Bible this man named Jesus was crucified. There really is nothing special about being a man in the flesh or even being crucified. Those of you who have studied history know the Romans crucified tens of thousands of common criminals, so the fact that he lived and the fact that he died does not make him any different than a lot of other people.

(3) Do you believe Jesus really came back from the grave?

That brings us to the third question. This is the one that separates those who are followers of Jesus and those who are not. Do you believe Jesus really came back from the grave? First you have to believe he really died. There are some who say, "I don't believe the real resurrection because I think he never really died to start with." There are some people who teach that he was simply unconscious, and was then revived in the coolness of the tomb. I hate to say it, but you can go to some liberal churches today in America on Easter Sunday, and the preacher who claims to be a Christian will stand up and say, "There really was no bodily resurrection. It was just a spiritual resurrection in the mind and the hearts of his followers." I believe Jesus really, really died. He was stone cold dead and I think he came back to life again. In the magazine, *Christianity Today*, there is a regular column called "Dear Uticus." It's kind of a Christian "Dear Abby." Several years ago someone wrote a letter and said, "Dear Uticus, our pastor said on Easter Sunday that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think? Signed Bewildered." Uticus answered with the following: "Dear Bewildered, I suggest that you beat your pastor repeatedly with a cat of nine tails, nail him to a cross with large nails, hang him in the sun for six hours, run a spear through his heart, embalm him, put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours, and you see what happens, signed Uticus."

What you believe about the resurrection first begins by your belief that he really did die on that cross. I'm not going to force you to believe and God is not going to force you to believe. God gives you free choice. God doesn't have some heavenly Windows 95 where he just pushes the Enter button and all of a sudden you go into motion and fall on your knees. He gives you free choice. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that divides what people believe about Jesus because there are multitudes of people who admit Jesus was a good man and a good teacher, set forth a moral cause, but to say he died and came back from the dead is what makes him different.

Verse 3 says he had a human nature, but verse 4 says, "and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared," in English the word *declared* just doesn't really cut it. It is a word in the original Greek language from which we get our word *horizon*, but if you read the word: "through the Spirit of holiness was *horizoned* to be with power," it doesn't make sense. Have you ever been out West and watched a beautiful sunset? The line where the earth ends and the sky begins is the horizon. If you're like my wife and I, we like to go to the beach and sit out until the sun sets.

Where the water ends and the sky begins is the line of the horizon. The horizon is a line of demarcation. When I in pilot training, I was taught that when you are flying in visual flight rules, which means you are out in the clear, you always look at the horizon to keep your relative balance, to keep the wings level. Years later when I got my instrument rating, they taught us that even when we are in clouds. How do you think those people keep the airplane level? Inside the cockpit is an instrument called an artificial horizon, operated by a gyroscope. Whichever way the plane turns, the gyroscope lets the instruments know where the plane is relative to the horizon. So, when the Bible says Jesus was *horizoned* to be the Son of God by the resurrection, it means it is the resurrection of Jesus that separates him from every other person who ever lived.

There have been a lot of religious teachers, but I am here to tell you Jesus Christ is the only man who ever died and came back from the dead and is alive forevermore. What about these “near death experiences?” The key word is *near* death experiences. What about Lazarus, who died and was in the tomb for four days? Jesus raised him. He was dead and came back to life. Here’s the key. Anybody else who has ever had a “near death experience,” even Lazarus, were revived from the dead, but they died later. Lazarus died again, but Jesus Christ is the only one who died, and came back from the dead and he kept on living, and he’s alive today. That’s the difference between being revived and resurrected. Jesus Christ is *horizoned*. He is set apart from everybody else by the resurrection. Mohammed cannot claim that, nor can the followers of Mohammed in Islam claim their leader was dead and he’s alive forevermore. Buddhists cannot claim it. Those who follow the teachings of Confucius cannot claim it. Jesus is the only one who claims it.

Jesus’ resurrection: fact or fiction?

When it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, there are only two positions. It’s either fact or fiction. You either believe it really literally happened or you don’t. I have met some people whose names are on church rolls, who attend church frequently or perhaps infrequently, and they say, “I go to church because it makes me feel good or because my wife wants me to go, but if you really pin me down, preacher, no, I don’t believe it. I think that was a story the early disciples concocted so their message could gain acceptance in that kind of world.” Everybody in this room either stands on one side or the other when it comes to the resurrection. Did it really happen or was it just a fictional story?

Let’s say you own a secular bookstore and everything in your bookstore is classified as fiction and nonfiction. Where would you put the Bible? Would you put it in the nonfiction section with historical truth, or would you put it over here in the fictional section with the other fairy tales and mythology? If you were a librarian and your job is to classify all the books in the library, where are you going to put the Bible? That is a fundamental decision everybody must make. Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen?

There are some good people who don’t believe it and haven’t believed it. I admire Thomas Jefferson, who had one of the greatest minds when it came to government, education and politics, but Thomas Jefferson was a Deist, not a Christian. That means he believed in a deity, but he did not believe Jesus was God. Thomas Jefferson had the practice of taking a pen and marking out every section that dealt with the miraculous in the Bible. You can go to Monticello today and see the very Bible he used where he marked out the sections he did not believe.

Thomas Jefferson went through his Bible and marked out all the resurrection narratives in the four gospel accounts. In Thomas Jefferson's Bible the gospel story ends this way. "The disciples laid the body of Jesus in the tomb, rolled the stone over the opening, and they went away very sad." End of the story. For some people, that's the story of Jesus. What sets Christians apart is that we believe he came *back* from the grave.

2. YOUR RESPONSE TO JESUS

Do you really think he came in the flesh as a man? Do you think he died on the cross? Do you really believe it? Do you really think he came back from the dead? That leads us to the second thing, your response to Jesus. Because you can believe all that in your head, and you can say, "So what?" Did you know it is possible to believe and accept the historical event yet it never changes your life? Many of you believe in 1969 Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon and said, "One small step for man, a giant leap for mankind." I'll bet there are some people who don't believe it. They think it was all done in a Hollywood studio. You can believe it, but has it ever changed your life? NO. You either believe it or you don't believe it. You see, when you respond to Jesus, that's what exhibits a life change.

(1) The marks of a true believer: Faith Total trust, not mental agreement

Look at Romans 1:5-6. This is where Paul talks about his response. "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the OBEDIENCE that comes from FAITH. And you also are among those who are called to BELONG to Jesus Christ." In those three words—obedience, faith and belong—we see the way we are to respond to Jesus. But doesn't obedience come first? It is obedience that comes from faith. There is faith before there is obedience. Faith is total trust, not just mental agreement. It is possible for a man or a woman to believe Jesus lived in the flesh, died on the cross and came back from the grave—and still die and go to Hell. It is not what you believe in your mind, it is what you accept in your heart. You can give mental assent to all three of those statements, but until it transforms your life and you internalize it, it means nothing.

What is trust? Some people don't like to fly and you may be among the group of folks that refuse to fly. I heard this story about an old barnstormer who was traveling around from town to town. He had an old Stearman, which is a bi-plane with an open cockpit. He sold plane rides for twenty dollars. He landed in a pasture of one little town and everybody came out to see. He said, "Okay, folks, I'll give you a plane ride for twenty bucks." Nobody stepped forward. "Well, I'll give anybody a plane ride for ten dollars." Still nobody stepped forward. After a minute an old farmer stepped forward and said, "You know, I've always wanted to fly in one of those contraptions, but I don't want pay ten bucks." The pilot says, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a deal with you. You and your wife hop into the back seat there, and I'll take you for a plane ride absolutely free, but here's the deal. If you can endure the entire plane ride without making one sound, without saying one word, it's free. But if you say anything you have to pay me twenty bucks. The farmer said, "Hey, I'll do that." So they hopped into the back seat of the plane. They took off and this pilot decided he was going to do everything he could to make the man cry out in fear. He did loops, rolls, a hammerhead stall where they fly up and just stall straight back down. He turned it

this way and that. He almost made himself sick. Finally, he decided this guy's just not going to holler so they landed, and the pilot said, "Sir, you are the bravest guy I have ever known, because I scared myself. I can't believe you didn't say a word." The man said, "Well, there was one time I almost hollered." The pilot said, "When was that?" He said, "When my wife fell out."

You know the reason some folks won't fly? They have just not arrived at a point where they are willing to trust the airplane, or trust the pilot, or trust the laws of aerodynamics. I don't fault them for that. There are just some people who have not chosen to put faith and trust in those things. The same thing is true when it comes to Jesus Christ. Think about faith in Jesus like flying in an airplane. You can go out to Pounds Field and watch those airplanes take off day in and day out, and you can say, "You know what? I believe airplanes can fly." You can even read about aerodynamics. You can read about the Wright brothers and everything else. You can even talk to people who say, "Well, I've flown a lot in my life..." You can believe in your head all of those things, but, you don't really put your faith in that pilot, that airplane and the laws of aerodynamics until you do what? Until you climb up the little stairway, and sit down in the little seat, and buckle the seatbelt, and they shut the door, and they taxi out and go down the runway, and take off. Every time you do that, my friend, you are placing faith in that airplane, in the skill of the pilots and in the laws of aerodynamics. Not only do you believe it in your head, you are entrusting your whole life to it, aren't you? The same is true about Jesus Christ. You can believe all those statements about Jesus in your head, but it is not until you entrust yourself to him that faith becomes real.

(2) Obedience: Faith that doesn't obey is faulty

Faith leads to something else, because it says in verse 5 "it is obedience that comes from faith" and so that's the second response. You obey Jesus because you put your faith and trust in him. When I was a child growing up in south Alabama, we had opening assembly in Sunday School every week and we sang the same song every Sunday because the lady who played the piano could only play that one song. So, two things happened as a result of me hearing that song every Sunday morning of my childhood: First, I don't particularly like the tune of that song anymore. But the second thing, and it is positive, the phrases of that song have been indelibly etched in my mind. Have you ever had the words of a song that keeps going through your mind? It stays in there, and stays in there, and stays in there. I'll tell you what it is for me and it's a great, great message, and I thank God we sang this song every Sunday morning. "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." That's it. Trust and obey. It's not the opposite order; it's not obey and then trust, it is trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. Let me just tell you something about obey. Faith that doesn't obey is faulty. Faith that doesn't obey is faulty. Here's a dilemma we have in America today.

Statistics tell us more Americans than ever before are saying they believe in God. More Americans by percentage than ever before are saying they believe the Bible. More Americans, a higher percentage, than ever before are claiming to be Christians. What's the dilemma you wonder? People aren't acting like Christians. They are ignorant of this book. They are not obeying this book. What they are saying is, "I believe, I have faith, but their lifestyles don't match it. You can say all day long you believe something, but unless you are willing to obey

God, your faith is faulty. You say, "What are you talking about?" You say you believe? You say, "I believe in God, I believe in Jesus, but I don't think you have to go to church." Just obey the book. It says you gather together every week with believers. You say, "Well, I believe in God, I believe in Jesus Christ, but I don't think you have to love your neighbor." It's in the book. If it's in the book, you'd better obey it. You say, "I believe in God, I believe in Jesus, but I don't think you have to be baptized." It's in the book. Do you see what I'm saying? You can say what you believe all you want to, but only that which you obey do you really believe. Christians like to say, "I believe the Bible. I believe it, cover to cover, all the way from the front to the back."

The only part of this book I believe and the only part of this book you believe is the part you and me obey. Everything else is just fluff. Is there obedience in your life? That's the question. Did you notice Paul says in verse 5. "It is obedience that comes from faith."

(3) Relationship: Do you know Jesus personally?

Here's the third thing. It is a relationship. Now, here's the sequence. There's faith, which produces obedience, which produces a relationship. Look at verse 6. It says, "And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus." I like that phrase, "belong to Jesus." Sometimes people say, "I belong to Green Acres Baptist Church." It is better to belong to Jesus. Belonging to a church won't get you into heaven, but belonging to Jesus will. What that means is you have a real relationship with Jesus. Here's the question I want to ask you. It is the most important question you will ever answer. Here it is. Do you know Jesus personally?

Have you ever been to a restaurant and say to the maître d' "I'm with them." What that means is "I know them, they know me and it's okay for me to be with them. I belong with their group." Have you ever been talking with someone and you see your spouse, and say, "He or she belongs to me"? In other words, you're describing a relationship, either a relationship of marriage or a relationship of friendship. Parents or grandparents, don't you like to talk about those kids and grandkids? "Oh, they belong to me." That's talking about a relationship.

The question I have for you today is when Jesus Christ talks about you today, does He say to the Father and to the angels, "He belongs to me. She belongs to me." You have a relationship with Jesus. It's baffling, isn't it? As we approach the end of the 20th century, it has economically probably never been better: 9,000 on the Dow, 10,000 probably by summertime, amazing. Technologically, it has never been better, has it? Computers are getting faster and smaller. Technology is just expanding. You say, "Whoa! The world is just getting better." But folks, *morally*, we are in a heap of trouble. Our morality is lagging behind economics and technology. Why does a guy pull a Ryder truck full of dynamite in front of a federal building and set it off? Why do two middle school kids put on camouflage outfits, pull a fire alarm and then use sniper rifles and shoot their classmates and teachers? Why? According to Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We are living in a world that is economically and technologically expanding, but we are living in a world that still has people who have sinful hearts. What you need is a new heart. What everybody needs is a new heart. That only comes by a relationship with Jesus Christ.

I could ask you if you know Jesus but a much more important question is, "Does Jesus know you?" Does he know you? The gospel is good news, but it is not good unless you know the bad news. Jesus said in Matthew 7:21-23, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Depart from me. Away from me you evildoers. This is talking about religious people, people who went to church, who knew the religious jargon, who even did religious service, miracles, prophesying, but somewhere in the transaction, they never had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Let me compare it with another one of our forefathers, George Washington. Do you believe in George Washington? Do you believe the facts of his life and that he was the first President, a great Revolutionary War general? Do you believe he had wooden teeth? Do you think he crossed the Delaware River? Do you think he cut down the cherry tree? You can believe all these things about him, but does anyone in this room know George Washington personally? No. Nobody does. He is dead. Well, here is Jesus of Nazareth. Do you believe he was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on the cross and came back from the dead? Is there anybody in this room who really does know Jesus Christ personally? Of course! You can't know George Washington, he's dead, but you can know Jesus Christ because he is alive. You may think I am crazy and weird, but I know him! I know him more intimately than I know my wife. I talk to him every day, many times during the day. I am always aware of his presence with me. Do you know him? Do you know Jesus Christ? You can believe the resurrection and unless you know him, you have never experienced the resurrection in your life.

CONCLUSION

Vance Havner, one of my heroes in the faith, tells a story about a man who came home from work one day and his wife was visibly shaken and upset. He said, "Honey, what's wrong?" She said, "The strangest thing happened today, a man knocked on my door, and when I opened the door, it was a stranger. He said, 'Ma'am, do you know Jesus?' I was so shocked by his question, I didn't know what to say so I just shut the door in his face." Her husband got upset. He said, "Honey, why didn't you tell him you sing in the choir every Sunday at our church? Why didn't you tell him you are the President of the Ladies Aid Society at our church? Why didn't you tell that man every Christmas you collect toys for the poor in our community? Why didn't you tell him those things?" She said, "That's not what he asked. He asked me if I knew Jesus." The most important question you can answer is, "Do you know Jesus personally?"

OUTLINE

I. THE REALITY ABOUT JESUS (2-4)

Do you believe Jesus really:

1. Lived in the flesh?
2. Died on a cross?
3. Came back from the grave?

JESUS' RESURRECTION: Fact or Fiction?

II. YOUR RESPONSE TO JESUS (5-6)

The marks of a true believer:

1. Faith: Total trust, not mental agreement
2. Obedience: Faith that doesn't obey is faulty.
3. Relationship: Do you know Jesus personally?

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" *Matthew 7:21-23*



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes