

DEATH OF THE DEBT COLLECTOR

Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.

Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.

But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"

She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.""

Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her. (John 20:1-18)

This is the big one. This is the sign of all signs for all time. Yet, Jesus said it was to be given to a perhaps unexpected group. He said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Mat 12: 39,40)

All the previous signs in the book of John were recorded to encourage the believers to increase their faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah (Jn 20:30,31). But, the sign of the resurrection was specifically said by Christ to be for an evil and adulterous generation of sign seekers. Now, the resurrection of

Jesus is the most blessed event in all the history of mankind. It is the fundamental belief required for salvation. The Bible says, "...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus (that is, who He is and what He did for you on Calvary's cross) and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom 10:9) Now, over the centuries, many Christians and 'Christian' cults have added to these simple requirements, but there are no other requirements for salvation – no additional belief(s) or mandatory 'merit badges'.

It's the one key. It's the narrow way. It's the doorway to eternal life. So, of course, it's for the evil and adulterous – that's you and me, not just the Pharisee. The resurrection is the underpinning for our entire faith – no resurrection, no Christianity. Paul wrote, "...if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty...And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." (1 Cor 15:14,17,18)

From the earliest times of Biblical history, this has been the creed. In what is probably the oldest book of the scriptures, a weary, tested yet confident Job declared, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25 – 27) A dead redeemer wouldn't do it; it was the living Redeemer upon whom he fixed his faith.

The critics of Christ rarely debate His motives or death. They are quick, however, to try to dismiss His resurrection.

Wasn't the cross enough?? Can't we just believe that Christ died for our sins? What's so critical about believing the witnesses to His resurrection? To answer this, we must follow the Apostle John so to speak into the realm of the spirit. In the book of Revelation, he recorded, "And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?' And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it."

"So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.'"

"And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne." (Rev 5:1-7)

Here, the Lamb of God who had been slain and was yet alive came and took the scroll with the seven seals. He was the only One who could look at it, hold it and open it. Note that John, when at first it

appeared that no one could take the scroll from God the Father, wept much. The scene was obviously tearing him up, rending his heart.

All men die. Some men have died for good or noble reasons. A few have died heroically. Yet none were found worthy to take the scroll. Why is this, and what's this scroll anyway?

When mankind represented by Adam and Eve opened the door to sin and death, humanity began to build an enormous, unimaginably huge debt. Recall Jesus taught us to pray, *"And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors."* (Mat 6:12) The Bible says that all men are born in sin. As a consequence, we have a sin nature. The old saying is we're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we're sinners. (See e.g. Rom 3:23) In addition, the right to rule this world which was given originally by God to man passed to Satan, "the god of this world". We know this as Jesus did not contest the devil's claim during His wilderness temptation. Luke recorded that, *"The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."* (Luke 4:5-7)

Now, in Leviticus 25, the Lord specified that the earth is His and therefore any debt incurred on the land if not redeemed would nevertheless be cancelled during the year of Jubilee (every 50th year). However, that which pertained to man, that which man established, that is, his kingdoms, walled cities

and such – the stuff of which man is quite proud – if it fell into a debt situation and was not redeemed, it remained forever indebted. Sin creates a debt and its 'collector' is death which was the power of Satan (Heb 2:14).

In John's day, it was common to have scrolls representing a form of ownership such as a deed or an inheritance. If a debt was incurred against the property represented by the scroll, it would be sealed and the debt recorded on the outside. Only when the debt(s) were paid could the scroll be surrendered and opened. With this in mind, I suggest that the scroll seen by John in the heavenly scene was representative of mankind. The earth, though it is under a curse (see Gen 3:17) belongs to the Lord. Mankind, however, had to be redeemed.

Because all men sin and die, none could ever pay the debt of sin. What was needed was someone sinless, someone perfect. This was pictured for thousands of years in the sacrifice of a spotless, i.e. perfect lamb. Enter Jesus, the one and only Man to live a sinless life. In taking upon Himself the entirety of our sin at Calvary, He satisfied the debt and destroyed the debt collector. He and He alone is worthy to take the scroll – to look upon it and open it. Mankind is now His. If He had not paid the debt with His life, John knew that all of us would forever be obligated to die.

Now, back to our original question – what is it about the resurrection that makes it the key to eternal life. After all, couldn't Jesus just have gone on to heaven in as a purely spirit-being? Why come back in a physical (albeit more powerful)

body? Here's why -- the resurrection is the one sign for evil and adulterous sign seekers because it shows that God, as the final Judge, accepted the payment for our evil and adulterous ways as being made in full. None of the debt remains; past, present and future sin – it's all paid for. The resurrection is our guarantee that we indeed have eternal life in Christ Jesus if we will simply believe and accept it. Without the resurrection, we would have at best been left guessing. Because of it, we can be 100% sure -- since our Savior emerged from that tomb, we will never see death either. We who believe will simply one day pass from a temporal life to eternal life in a moment.

"Max Lucado, in his book, Six Hours One Friday, tells the story of a missionary in Brazil who discovered a tribe of Indians in a remote part of the jungle. They lived near a large river. The tribe was in need of medical attention. A contagious disease was ravaging the population. People were dying daily."

"A hospital was not too terribly far away—across the river, but the Indians would not cross it because they believed it was inhabited by evil spirits. To enter the water would mean certain death. The missionary explained how he had crossed the river and was unharmed. They were not impressed. He then took them to the bank and placed his hand in the water. They still wouldn't go in. He walked into the water up to his waist and splashed water on his face. It didn't matter. They were still afraid to enter the river. Finally, he dove into the river, swam beneath the

surface until he emerged on the other side. He punched a triumphant fist into the air. He had entered the water and escaped. It was then that the Indians broke out into a cheer and followed him across."

"That's exactly what Jesus did! He told the people of His day that they need not fear the river of death, but they wouldn't believe. He touched a dead boy and called him back to life. They still didn't believe. He whispered life into the body of a dead girl and got the same result. He let a dead man spend 4 days in a tomb and then called him out and the people still didn't believe Him. Finally, He entered the river of death and came out on the other side. No wonder we celebrate the Resurrection!" (Bruce Howell)

On a final note, it's fascinating that Jesus referred to His resurrection as being the sign of the prophet Jonah for he was the only prophet who was specifically sent to preach to the gentiles. You'll recall that it was after Jonah's 'resurrection' out of the belly of the great fish that the message of repentance was taken to the gentile nation. And they received it! They repented and were saved from judgment. So it has been with the message of the gospel. It was taken to the gentiles and they have received it as well.

Simply put, Christ's death on Calvary reconciled us to God and His resurrection brought us life, that is, saved us from death. Paul wrote, *"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."* (Rom 5:10)

Receive the sign of Jonah. Believe the resurrection and live!