

THE CERTAINTY OF WHAT WE BELIEVE

The certainty of what we believe: Easter Sunday evening (2024)

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 31st March 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Hebrews 3:12-15

Introduction

As I stated in one of our Easter videos this week; Christians believe in something remarkable, for we believe that Jesus rose from the dead. However, that belief is not a baseless belief — it's not something that's been made up on a whim, or is the result of folklore over the years. No, no. Rather this is something rooted and grounded in fact that there is abundant evidence for, and as such has literally changed millions upon millions of lives.

And so, this evening, I want to bring us back to some things we've looked at before, that we might be reminded of the certainty of what we believe.

Mars hill

Starting in Athens, as recorded in the book of Acts, we find that the apostle Paul had travelled there, was waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive. And we pick up the account in verse 16:

Acts 17:16-21

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there. Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.

So then, Paul had their interest — and the people had brought him to a place called Mars Hill, where public debates would regularly take place, on a range of topics. And taking this opportunity we read:

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

So, Paul set God forth as our and their creator, judge, and resurrected Saviour, calling them to repent and put their faith in Him. In response, we see some did choose to believe, but others remained skeptical that a man could rise from the dead. We read:

Acts 17:32-34

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter." So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

And no matter the preacher, some will remain skeptical even today. Some, because they are trying to comprehend what is a truly world-changing, life-changing, eternity-changing, remarkable event. But some because deep down, they do not *want* to believe, and so rather, they choose to mock.

Others, liking the idea of Christianity and its morals, but unwilling to accept the truth of it, will even try to suggest you can have Christianity without believing in the resurrection. Yet without the resurrection, there is no such thing as Christianity. To put it simply; the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to what we believe. And as we *read* this morning, without the resurrection, we are still in our sins. Let's read again that passage from 1 Corinthians 15:

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 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. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 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. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

But Paul didn't doubt the certainty of the resurrection for a minute. In fact, earlier on in this same chapter he made clear how well known Jesus' resurrection was, not as theory, but as fact. We read in verses 3 to 8:

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

That is, literally hundreds of people had seen Jesus following His resurrection, that were still alive at the time Paul was writing this letter to the Christians in Corinth. In other words, there were living eyewitnesses that any one of them could have verified this with. And that was in addition to being seen alive by all of Jesus' disciples, except Judas of course.

Imagine the weight of evidence that was, and indeed is! It's not like there was one or two vague reports of someone seeing someone they thought looked like Jesus. It wasn't like someone thinking they saw Elvis in the supermarket! This was an enormous amount of eyewitness evidence.

And beyond that, Paul also pointed to how all that happened to Jesus was a literal fulfilment of prophecies throughout the Old Testament scriptures. He had zero doubt! And again, he reckoned our salvation to be entirely dependant on this great fact, writing to the Christians in Rome about the righteousness of faith, saying:

Romans 10:9-10

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

The Bible makes clear that Jesus rose from the dead, and that the disciples believed it. And that Paul believed it. And we know from history that almost all died for what they believed. That's how sure they were of it.

Mocking

However, as we saw recorded of the people in Athens, some still mocked at the idea. And the same is true today. One of the most notable critics in our country is Richard Dawkins, more quiet of late it seems, but one who has persistently tried to sow doubt in what we believe. You may recall that a good few years back he took a swing at the certainty of what we believe, in his book titled *The God Delusion*, writing:

"Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history. . . . The gospels are ancient fiction."

Richard Dawkins

Unfortunately for Dawkins, and for those who hope he is right, his theory is brutally assaulted by the facts. And it doesn't even stand up to common sense, as a great article by Bernard N Howard called out, back in 2015. He wrote this:

If Dawkins is correct, one might imagine the following conversation . . .

Luke: Let's have another round of drinks. I've an idea I want to run past you.

John: Sure. What's on your mind?

Luke: You probably heard about the Nazarene named Jesus who was crucified yesterday. I think he could be the perfect candidate for our fake Messiah project.

Mark: One tiny problem: he's dead!

Luke: Yes, but that means we'll control the narrative. We'll be in charge of his reputation.

Matthew: Who would follow a dead Messiah?

Luke: Nobody, so we'll begin with a resurrection myth. We'll hire some thugs to fight off the soldiers guarding his tomb so we can get rid of the corpse.

John: But a missing corpse isn't the same as a resurrection.

Luke: You're right, so we'll have to persuade Jesus's friends to spend the next 30 years telling everyone he's risen from the dead, even if sticking to that story means they'll be imprisoned or killed.

Mark: Okay, then what?

Luke: Well, to make a conspiracy credible you need precise details. So we'll invent stories where Jesus interacts with people in specific locations.

Matthew: Won't people just disprove the stories by visiting those places and asking around?

Luke: There's no need to worry about that. We could invent a story about a synagogue ruler's terminally ill daughter being healed, give the synagogue ruler a name, set it all in a particular place, and still no one—absolutely no one, not even the people living in that place—would trouble to fact-check. Everyone would simply swallow the story whole!

Mark: It sounds like we're on safe ground there. But if we want people to follow Jesus, he'll need a message. People have been waiting for the Messiah for centuries. He's got to be worth listening to when he finally appears.

John: Good point. I'll cook up some deep quotes.

Luke: Thanks, John. Mark's right: you'll need to put profound wisdom on Jesus's lips that theological scholars can happily study for their entire careers.

John: Not a problem.

Luke: Guys, it will take us a while to put these documents together. We need to get communities of people worshipping Jesus in the meantime so that when our books come out they'll get a good reception.

Mark: There's a guy I know called Saul, he could help with that.

Luke: Saul the Pharisee? I can't imagine him getting involved with this kind of thing.

Mark: Trust me, he's our man. I see him leaving behind everything he's been trained to do and planting congregations of Jesus worshipers throughout the Roman Empire, whatever it costs him personally—beatings, shipwrecks, and the like.

Matthew: Awesome. But Luke, can you just remind me, what's the point of all this? I mean, what exactly do we get out of this?

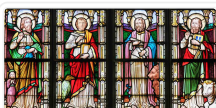
Luke: Come on, Matt, it will be so much fun. We'll watch people being brutally martyred, and we'll know they've been deceived by our dishonest fiction! What's not to like about that?

John: I agree with Luke. This is definitely worth years of effort on our part. Count me in.

Mark: Me too.

Matthew: I'll do it if my name comes first in all the promotional material.

Luke: Deal. Let's get to work.



If Richard Dawkins Is Right

Bernard Howard imagines a conversation between writers of the four Gospels if the story of Jesus...

TGC Author  Bernard N. Howard

We laugh, because this does a good job of showing how ridiculous and non-sensical Dawkins's standpoint is. Yet the sad reality is that there are many who believe him, or at least hope he is right. But let that not be you, for you are better informed — for a start by the Bible, which we *can* trust.

Eyewitnesses

Indeed, Paul wasn't the only Biblical author to write about the certainty of what we believe, for Peter, who himself *died* for what he believed, wrote this in his second letter:

2 Peter 1:16-21

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. **And so we have the prophetic word confirmed**, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

In other words, Peter was saying "we didn't make this up! Rather, we were eyewitnesses of all these things". And this was evidenced in his life and death, for not only did he maintain that what he believed was true *even* when his *own wife* was crucified in front of him, but he was so reverent towards God that he refused to be killed in the same manner as Jesus, and so was in fact crucified upside down. No-one does that for something that they made up!

"Oh, but you can't rely on the Bible to inform you", some say. Well, first, why not? Why is there any reason to doubt it, other than what you *want* to be the case. "Well, it's changed a lot over the years!" - really?! Let's consider that. Let's consider that first, the Bible as we have it today is in total agreement with itself, with no contradictions. That alone is testament to this being a special book. But furthermore, let's consider how sure we can be of the reliability of other historical books that we take, perhaps ironically, as gospel (as some would say).

That is, when you look at the writings of Julius Caesar, on which we base much of our knowledge of the Roman Empire, there are less than 20 surviving hand-written copies in existence. Yet, when it comes to the New Testament, there are 24'000 surviving copies! There is no comparison at all! And we could dig deeper into what is called the manuscript authority of other ancient texts, and find a similarly scant number of handwritten copies (at least, compared to the Bible) of those other works that we don't question like people do the Bible.

Consider also that the magnitude of what happened through Jesus birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, is so profound, that our entire date system is based off when Jesus was born. Can you imagine how seriously the impact of His time on earth was, to have achieved that?!

And then consider how many people have vehemently tried to destroy the Bible, and failed. Some have even set out to disprove it, and been confronted with such evidence that they became Christians themselves. Josh McDowell and Lee Strobel are two such examples, writing books titled *Evidence that demands a verdict* (by McDowell) and *The case for Christ* (by Strobel), respectively.

But let me offer one more tangible piece of evidence — and that is my life, and (if you know the Lord), your life too. We are living evidence of what the risen Christ has done, and is doing. For I don't just know about Jesus. I know Him. And He knows me. I am able to talk to Him each day. And I have heard Him speak to me. Not audibly. But personally. And I know that for sure. For sure. And there are many, many others who know Jesus too. And so certain are they about what they believe, they are willing to live their lives so differently to the world around them. They are willing to move their families across continents for the sake of serving Jesus, or willing to forgo having a family at all for the sake of serving Him. They are willing to be persecuted, slandered, and imprisoned. They are willing to lay down their lives for the One who laid down His life for them.

Conclusion

Taking all these things, the question facing you, is not whether there is sufficient evidence *for* Christ, but are you willing to *accept* it. And more importantly, are you willing to accept *Him*?

If you already have, you can have great boldness knowing that we have not followed cunningly devised fables, but we are believing the truth. You can be sure of that.

But if you have not yet repented, and put your faith in Jesus, confessing with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, then you are not saved, and you will meet God as your judge, not your Saviour. That is a frightening proposition, and I urge you to consider what you've heard this evening, with urgency.

For the audio recording of this Bible study, and for additional studies, please see the DCF web site:

