

Sermon 2: Acts 1:3: The 'Proof' of the Resurrection

OUTLINE

The nature of the evidence
The foundation of our knowing
The resistibility of truth

INTRODUCTION

Acts 1:3, 'He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.' Luke the author of Acts wrote two books to a Christian named Theophilus, the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In the opening of the book of Acts here Luke is reflecting on the gospel account of Christ's resurrection and appearances to the disciples. I want to draw your attention to Luke's language, 'by many proofs.' Luke is saying that Jesus presented Himself and proved the truth of His resurrection to the disciples. The word used for proof here is what we call a hapax legomena, it occurs only once in the Greek of the NT. It is one of the strongest words for proof or evidence. And so, some have translated it as 'convincing proofs.' It could also be translated as decisive or infallible proofs. Luke is of course appealing to the various post-resurrection appearances recorded in the gospels; the appearances to Mary, to the disciples in the upper room, to the disciples on the Emmaus road, to Thomas, etc. It was held by Luke that the evidence of Christ's resurrection was beyond doubt. That is probably too strong a statement because professional doubters can doubt anything. But according to the standards of the day Jesus resurrection could be confirmed by the highest standards.

The truth of the resurrection is not merely a fact that Christianity believes but it is the lynchpin of our faith. Since the resurrection is true so many other things are true because of it. Because Christ has risen from the dead, sins can be forgiven, 1 Cor. 15:17, 'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.' Because Christ is resurrected the final universal resurrection to judgement is also true, Acts 17:31, '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.' Because Christ is risen, death, Satan, sickness and all evil will be overcome. Because Christ is risen from the dead all injustice will be punished. The resurrection is not merely a fact in our system of beliefs but the foundation for them.

Today however the resurrection is not believed by many Atheists, Agnostics, Muslims and others. The reasons for their lack of faith are many: Some claim that he never died, that he swooned or someone else died. Some claim that he died but they went to the wrong tomb. Some claim that someone else like graverobbers or the Romans or Jews stole his body. Others claim that it was a mass hallucination and wish fulfilment. Some claim that the eye witness accounts were produced too long after the events to be useful. Some have claimed that the disciples made up the account based on their view of the OT. As we discuss the believability of the resurrection we want to look at it in two steps. Firstly, I would like us to consider the limits of the evidence and some of the reasons people will not believe these accounts. Secondly, I would like to propose an examination of the evidence we have and respond to some of the critiques.

The nature of the evidence

If Jesus presented infallible proofs to the disciples, why didn't all people at the time believe? This brings us squarely to the question, why don't people believe? What are the limits of the persuasive power of the evidence we have recorded of the resurrection?

Firstly, we need to recognise the historical distance between us and the authors of the eye witness accounts recorded in the bible. We do not have access to the first hand experiences of those who saw Jesus. In other words, we cannot go back in time and see the risen Jesus for ourselves. For some this would make any accepting of the resurrection as a fact impossible. We do however have the next best thing, eye witness accounts by those who were there. For those who bring the criteria of empirical verification to bear on the accounts we have, we have to highlight that we cannot produce evidence that is repeatable because of the nature of the case in question: Christ need only rise from the dead once. We do however, have eye witness accounts which at the time were the basis for establishing facts in a court of law. It is an anachronistic imposition to demand laboratory conditions for observation to determine something to be true. We admit that we cannot replicate the resurrection, no one can, given the one off nature of it. However, we can highlight the reasonableness of the resurrection given the accounts from eye witnesses that we do have. We would want to highlight all this for the sceptic and say that the resurrection would be one of the best attested historical events in the Ancient world. To my mind given these important qualifications I find the evidence very compelling and would urge an honest appraisal by all.

When it comes to evidence in a court of law, it is a case of innocent until proven guilty. This reminds us not to have prejudged the case before we come. When it comes to science evidence is used to support or reject a hypothesis. We cannot replicate laboratory conditions so this form of confirmation is beyond our ability to get at. When it comes to philosophical debate the burden of proof lies upon the person bringing the new claim. I would suggest that the one who denies the resurrection is the one who has the burden of proof because it has been believed for thousands of years. We are investigating an historical claim; in fact one of the more attested events in the ancient world. There are various authors in the bible who were eye witnesses, and even external witnesses that agree with the information revealed in the scriptures. So we will be applying the rules for investigating any event in the past.

The foundation of our knowing

But I need at this point to interrupt the standard discourse on how we are going to view the evidence and intrude the important thing everyone will need to realise. The most important reason why the resurrection is true is because the God of truth who has communicated in time has accurately recorded this for us in His word. We believe in the resurrection on the authority of the God who does not lie.

Now automatically this changes the epistemological grounds we stand on. Let me emphasize that in every attempt to defend the historicity of the resurrection we are using common rules of logic and investigation knowing that the truth will defend itself. But it must be made very clear that as Christians we are not believers or believe in the resurrection because we are clever enough to investigate the truth, but accept the truth from God, from the bible. How does that sound to you, you believe it because the bible says so. For many it sounds ludicrous. It is the common assumption of modern man that we only accept any truth we can prove. W. K. Clifford once made this famous statement, 'it is wrong always,

everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.¹ Listen to what apologist K. Scott Oliphant says about Clifford's maxim: 'We should also recognise that Clifford's maxim cannot meet its own criterion for rationality. 'What evidence is there,' we could ask 'that everything must have sufficient evidence in order to be rationally held?' Indeed, what evidence could there be for a Cliffordian?

Suppose a disciple of Clifford's maxim were able to establish, say, three evidential propositions meant sufficiently to support the maxim. Would it not be the case that each of those evidential propositions would themselves be in need of sufficient evidence in order to be rationally held or believed? And what if there were evidential propositions sufficient to support the evidential propositions that sufficiently supported Clifford's maxim. Wouldn't those, too, be in need of sufficient evidence? And on it goes.

The dilemma is obvious. There simply cannot be sufficient evidential propositions ad infinitum. There has to be some 'place'—some proposition, some concept, some idea, some foundation of authority—that is sufficient to carry the conceptual weight of what we claim to know, believe, and hold.²

This is where the bible comes into it. We have a solid basis for knowing because the God who is there has spoken. We are not left to follow our own noses to the truth in an infinite regress of constantly try and find the thing that holds up the next thing we believe. God has delivered the truth to us from His infinite perspective. Only the Christian then has a solid basis for knowing, the evidentialist worldview has no foundation for its beliefs.

No doubt they would respond and say, 'Well, how do you know the bible is true?' Then we would respond and say, 'because it says it is the word of God.' This will bring a sneer onto their faces and they will say, 'Now, that is a circular argument, you have assumed what you want to prove.' And we would respond and say, 'Yes, all ultimate truth claims are necessarily circular, otherwise you would have a greater authority than your claimed ultimate authority and you would be on the path of an infinite regress.' Ironically, this exposes the fact that evidentialist is beginning by faith, not on the basis of any 'known' fact.

We know truth because God reveals it to us, and we believe the resurrection to be true because the bible teaches it. This is a very important foundation when looking into the views of unbelievers. Let me just say that everything can be argued against, an apparently logical argument can be made to make $2+2=5$. There are no uncontested truths. If you go onto the internet and ask a question I promise you you will find a refutation to every argument. That is why we need to press every argument back to their basis for knowing and expose that they cannot know truly but have to make a leap somewhere, where the Christian view has a rational basis for knowing.

The resistibility of truth

There is however a deeper reason for unbelief that we need to highlight. We are sinners prone to unbelief, and even if a thing is true we are willing to resist the truth. What is unbelief? Must we accept the non-Christian notion that we are all blank slates with neutral and reasonable minds who merely wait to be convinced of the existence of God and the need of Christ? Is accepting evidence simply a matter of education or is there a moral aspect to accepting the truth? And if we are not convinced is the problem with the evidence, the person trying to prove God, or God Himself for not being more convincing? The Christian answers, no. The teaching of the bible on believing the truth is that it is a

¹ Quoted by K. Scott Oliphant, *Covenantal Apologetics*, p113.

² *Ibid*, p127.

natural ability we all have; an opportunity we all have; and one that we all suppress in unrighteousness. In fact, the bible talks about the multifarious way in which we lie to ourselves, and how glad we are to believe the lies as we cast off God.

The scripture begins its description of man telling us that we are made in the image of God, Gen. 1:27. Unique among God's creation, not only because God made us with His own 'hands' and deliberately gave us life in an intimate way by breathing it into us, Gen. 2:7; we are of all God's physical creatures the only ones who are religious in nature. We are homo religionis. Universally in history and geographically man has given expression to his belief in 'a god'. Many will be quick to point out how this so called 'belief' is based on ignorance and fear and is a shallow superstition from which scientific explanations can disabuse us. The Christian points to sin and ignorance for this distortion as a basic aspect of our being. The many bad ways we love does not prove love to be untrue but rather that we are broken lovers. And so it is with belief in God.

Your capacity for self-deception is infinite. The greatest liar in your life is you, and the person most willing to believe your own lies is you. 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?' - Jeremiah 17:9. You will find this easier to see in another than yourself. Let me illustrate it using a teenager. What is a teenager? The teenager is a budding adult in one of the most difficult periods of life. They are trying to understand themselves and the world. They are trying to answer the big questions about life and the future. They are terribly insecure and looking for identity and connection. They are not yet skilled in life, they do not yet have well developed character and are immature. They have the most hormones surging through their bodies than they will ever experience again and they live with sinners in the home.

Now imagine the typical situation where a parent who is imperfect comes along and criticises the teen. The teenager has been lazy and has neglected cleaning their room, doing their chores, and is generally not self-disciplined. They are sitting down doing 'nothing' and a parent after a busy and frustrating day at work comes home to a house that the teen has been using, with his friends, and the evidence of his activities are everywhere for someone else to now have to pick up. The parent, being a sinner yet being genuinely concerned begins the pep talk. It is not only a call to pick stuff up. Oh no, the parent can see that there is a root problem that needs attention not merely the symptoms. It becomes a life lesson with commentary on insufficient character, a dark future if this path continues, emotional blackmail, angry tirades, references to the parent's very different childhood, the ingratitude of the spoiled child, and a growing frustration and volume as a stoic face raised in defence reveals that this award winning speech is not going in. The parent may sin in anger or word or deed, and the child will react.

The child is in the wrong, and the parent has done wrong. But it is amazing how easy it will now be for the child to fixate upon the parent's sins, the hypocrisy and inconsistencies. And let's just agree that all parents are imperfect and the right to parent is not won by being perfect. And perfect parenting does not guarantee a perfect child, God's relationship with Israel proves that. But let us track with the now sullen teen's anger. It is very easy to become emotionally invested in the smallest sin against ourselves. In fact we are always angrier at things done against us than others. Our sense of justice is self-serving. We are not as angry at ourselves for what we do to others than when they do those things against us. Our outbursts of anger are inordinate to the actions done against us. All the arguments about the teen's character and actions, even if they are true will lose their efficacy and believability because I now have a grievance to nurture and focus on. The truth I need to hear will be like water off a duck's back because I don't want to hear it. This is how sin affects us we will what we want, and our response to the truth is something we do from our

wills which are influenced by our natures. The fact that the resurrection is true does not automatically carry with it the power to stop all counter arguments and make me believe it. I will gladly lie to myself about the size of your sins compared to mine and conveniently remind myself of how bad you have been anytime any argument is brought against me. Our hearts work in the same way when we are talking about belief in God or the resurrection. We are all like a teenager when it comes to ourselves. Teenagers are not a different species, you just get better at justifying yourself as you get older. Hormones like alcohol don't create sin, they only amplify what is already there.

Because of sin beliefs are not the irresistible conclusions come to in the face of the truth. There are many beliefs that are false and many truths denied. Our reliance in evangelism will never be in the power of evidence, the objectivity of the person evaluating the facts or our own intelligence in winning an argument. We present the truth but trusting in the Spirit to make it 'real'.

Another good example would be in the area of food. Do you believe that too many carbs will make you fat; that too much salt will harden your arteries; that too much sugar, or caffeine, or alcohol, MSG, gluten, etc is bad for you? Knowing the truth do you still eat badly? Facts don't create and compel right actions because our hearts are biased and trend towards self-interest.

At the outset of this series of apologetics I need to expose the truth about unbelief and our response to evidence. The bible teaches us that we are fallen, and this fallenness affects every part of us. Our will, our minds, our emotions, everything is touched by sin. In particular we are now resistant to all things God. We resist Him, we reject His natural law, the law of being male and female, the law of being a family, the law of being religious, the law of submitting to authority. We reject the truth of God's existence that is communicated to us through creation, conscience, history and revelation. And so we lie to ourselves and believe our lies. Even in the face of proof we will be resistant unless it is a 'convenient' truth to believe. This brokenness is known to us all. This itself is a proof of the biblical message of your sin and need for a Saviour. Perhaps you have seen this recalcitrance in your own heart. You know you have a liar's heart and deny the truth. You have even felt the effect your lies have had on yourself and your loved ones. Pray to God to deliver you from yourself, to give you truth, to grant you light.

God is merciful to liars. Adam and Eve sinned, and when God confronted them, they lied. They shifted the blame, and even tried to blame God. But God did not punish, instead He made the promise of a child who would be born who would be their Saviour. That was the first promise of Jesus found in Gen. 3:15. Christ came to earth save liars. In fact, one of his disciples was a tax collector, a professional liar who imposed false taxes on his own people extorted money from them. He calls all now to leave their sins and follow Him.

Next week we will look at the historical facts as they are recorded in the bible. But today I have tried to show the two faulty foundations to every unbelievers worldview. They have no ultimate ground for knowing, and they lie about the truth. But God has come to the world in Christ to give light to those who are in darkness. Come to Him and receive that light.