

You Are Witnesses Of These Things

Luke 24:36-49

Introduction:

A rich man who had died and been judged by God for his rejection of Him realized that he would have to face eternal agony. Desiring to see his family members delivered from the same consequence, he pleaded with Abraham, who was in paradise, to send Lazarus back from the dead to his father's house. He believed that such a miraculous appearance before his brothers would convince them to repent.

In Luke 16:27-31, we read, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Many today share the thinking of the rich man. We have the idea that if enough evidence is presented to prove that what the Bible says is true, people will surely believe then. We think that the problem of unbelief is one of insufficient evidence. The fact is:

LACK OF FAITH IS NOT A PROBLEM OF INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE

For example, there is plenty of convincing proof that Jesus is risen from the dead, yet people still do not believe. If lack of evidence isn't the reason people don't believe, then what is it? Look with me at Luke 24:36-49.

Jesus had already made four post-resurrection appearances on the day of His resurrection. He appeared to Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb (Mk. 16:9-11; John 20:11-18). He appeared to a group of women in the vicinity of the empty tomb (Mt. 28:9-10). He appeared to Peter at an unknown location (Lk. 24:33-35; 1 Cor. 15:5). He also appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus. After these two men saw Jesus, they immediately brought a report back to the Eleven. As they are sharing with the disciples about their encounter with Jesus, He suddenly appears in their midst.

JESUS PRESENTS PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION TO THE ELEVEN (Acts 1:3; Luke 24:36-44)

He appears in their midst (36)

The Eleven did not believe based on the testimony of those who had seen Jesus. How surprised they must have been when Jesus suddenly showed up. He did not just appear off in the distance. Rather, He stood right in the middle of the group.

He instructs them to observe and touch Him (39-40)

Jesus instructs the Eleven to look at His hands and feet to see the nail marks in them. He asserts, “It is I myself!” He asks them to touch Him and to see that He has flesh and bones. It was really Jesus in the flesh! This was not the appearance of a ghost as the disciples first thought.

He eats in front of them (41b-43)

Jesus eats some broiled fish to prove to His doubting followers that He is indeed alive; that it is really Him in their midst.

He reminds them of His teaching (44)

Jesus reminds the Eleven of the Old Testament Scriptures He previously told them must be fulfilled while He was still with them. Jesus told the disciples about the events of his death and resurrection before they actually took place. After all of this, the disciples believe—Right? Jesus provides convincing, physical proof of His resurrection, and because of the evidence, the Eleven are quick to believe—Right? Wrong!

THE ELEVEN ARE SLOW TO BELIEVE

They are afraid (37)

When the Eleven first see Jesus, they think He is a ghost. I don’t think we should be too hard on the disciples for their initial reaction. After all, we know from John 20:19 that the doors of the room are locked as the Eleven are in hiding for fear of the Jews. Up to this point in time, they hadn’t yet observed the ability of a solid flesh and bones body being able to pass through locked doors. It is easy to understand how the disciples think at first that Jesus is a ghost.

Just the same, while the disciples’ response is understandable, they should have believed it was Jesus. Jesus promised to appear to the disciples after His resurrection in Galilee (Matthew 26:32). While this appearance in the locked room was in Jerusalem and occurred before His later appearance in Galilee, the disciples should have expected to see Him just the same.

They are unsettled and uncertain (38)

We would think that the disciples would have been relieved to see Jesus and to hear Him extend a greeting of peace, but instead they are all stirred up inside. Doubts flood their thinking. Jesus, as a means of gentle rebuke, asks the disciples why they are acting the way they are—“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?”

They are amazed and overjoyed (41a)

What better proof could there be than to be able to see and feel Jesus in the flesh?! When the disciples are shown Jesus’ hands and feet, they are amazed and overjoyed. Certainly evidence like this must have caused them to believe—Right?

They still don't believe! (41a)

Even though the Eleven are shown Jesus' hands and feet and are able to touch Him, they still think it is too good to be true.

Illustration: I once saw a commercial on T.V. advertising a show on The Learning Channel that illustrates how slow we are to believe. A man is shown his car just after it has been radically redone. Upon seeing it, He doesn't believe the car is really his. To prove that it is his car, the guys who did all the bodywork tell him it is his. He doesn't believe them. A judge affirms that the car is his. The guy doesn't believe him either. Then the guys' mother comes forward and tells him it is his car. To the testimony of his mother, the guy says, "That is not my mother." It was too good to be true. This guy could not believe he was standing next to his car.

WHY THE ELEVEN ARE SLOW TO BELIEVE

The problem isn't a lack of evidence

The reports of witnesses, seeing Jesus for themselves, hearing Jesus speak, observing the nail marks in Jesus' hands, touching Jesus' body, watching Jesus eat—The Eleven had plenty of evidence and still they do not believe.

The problem is lack of faith (Mark 16:14)

The reasons the disciples don't believe at first the testimony of the witnesses who had seen Jesus after His resurrection isn't an issue of insufficient evidence, but an unwillingness to accept it. The disciples don't believe because they refuse to believe, because they are unwilling to believe.

Mark 16:14- "Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen."

LACK OF FAITH IS A PROBLEM OF THE HEART

Someone might say today, "I would believe in the resurrection if I saw Jesus, but I never have, so I never will believe unless I do see Him. Sure, we have the story of the disciples seeing Jesus, but how do we know that the disciples didn't make this story up. I don't believe anything unless I see it for myself."

When we say things like this, we act as if we don't have enough evidence to prove that Jesus really rose from the dead. Even though none of us have ever physically seen Jesus, there is plenty of convincing proof that He did in fact rise from the dead. For example:

The disciples don't expect a resurrection and don't believe it when first given evidence.

When people fabricate a story, it is not likely that they will paint themselves in a negative light. If the disciples' account of Jesus' resurrection were made up, why would they admit being slow to believe because of hard hearts? Why did they make themselves look bad by recording that they weren't expecting a resurrection when Jesus so clearly predicted there would be one?

The women see Jesus first

Jesus' first resurrection appearance was to women. If a person were making up a story in the time of Jesus, he would not have put women at the tomb first. Women, in that day, weren't considered reliable witnesses. No one would have made up a story like this.

The stone is rolled away

The stone that was used to seal Jesus' tomb would have been three to six feet in diameter and would have weighed two to five tons. It took several men to roll it into place. Making the feat of rolling the stone away more difficult, there was a seal on the tomb that could only be broken by a Roman official. Anyone caught breaking the seal would be put to death. Besides placing a seal on the tomb, the Romans posted guards to make sure no one took Jesus' body. All of these security measures were taken because the chief priests and Pharisees wanted to make sure that the disciples were not able to steal his body to make it look like the resurrection happened. Who rolled the stone away? The disciples? The Roman guards would have stopped them. No Roman guard would have risked the penalty of death to allow Jesus' disciples to steal His body. The Jews? Same thing. The Romans? Not likely. They had no motivation. Who rolled the stone away? God did.

The disciples are transformed from cowards to courageous preachers because of the gospel

The disciples are uncertain, frightened and hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews when they are still in unbelief. When they come to believe that Christ has truly risen, they are radically and completely transformed. They go everywhere preaching the gospel to anyone who will listen. Persecution, opposition, hatred, hardship, and even the threat of martyrdom don't intimidate them. Why? These men observed the risen Christ and it changed their lives.

The tomb is empty and no one ever found His body

Jesus' tomb is empty and the only plausible way to explain the disappearance of His body is that He is risen. After all, it is clear from Scripture that the religious leaders of Israel were determined to keep Jesus' body in the grave for more than three days so they could prove His resurrection predictions false. The Jews would have done anything possible to produce Christ's body, but they never did.

The Romans too were determined to keep Jesus' body in the tomb. The Romans would not have wanted the "bad press" from their not being able to keep a single gravesite secure.

Instead of admitting the resurrection took place, a conspiracy was concocted. We learn from Matthew 28:11-15 that the guards responsible for looking after Jesus' tomb were paid a large sum of money to spread the false report that the disciples came and stole Jesus' body away. A body could not be found, so a fictitious story had to be made up. A body was not found, because Jesus is risen just as He said.

These are several of many proofs that Jesus is risen from the dead. I don't expect that anyone who came in this morning doubting or denying the resurrection of Christ will become a sudden believer because of the convincing proofs that I have just shared. Convincing unbelievers is not the reason I brought this evidence up in the first place. Rather, I mention these proofs of the resurrection to demonstrate that the lack of belief is not a problem of insufficient evidence. Any person who doesn't believe the convincing proofs of Jesus' resurrection remains unconvinced because of a heart issue. Unbelievers aren't convinced because they refuse to be convinced.

JESUS OPENS THEIR MINDS TO UNDERSTAND (24:45-49)

The Eleven need the Lord to open their minds to help them put together all that has been predicted about Christ in God's Word. Jesus' action of opening the disciples' minds to help them understand shows us how faith really operates—We don't believe in the resurrection because we see it. We are able to see the resurrection actually took place because we believe it. We come to believe the resurrection account when we hear the Scriptures proclaimed and God opens our minds to understand the truth He has revealed. As Romans 10:17 affirms, "...Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." It is the Word of God that brings us to faith.

He explains what Scripture predicts about Christ's death and resurrection (45-46)

Jesus opened the minds of the Eleven to understand the predictions in the Old Testament of Christ's death and resurrection and their responsibility to proclaim His light to the nations.

The Old Testament predicted that Christ would die in our place, taking upon Himself the penalty for our sins in order that we might have peace with God when we trust in Him.

Isaiah 53:4-7 (NIV)- "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

The Old Testament predicted Christ's resurrection.

Psalms 16:10- "because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay."

Do we understand what is written about the Christ? May God open our minds to understand and believe what is written in the Scripture!

Jesus died for our sins, just as Isaiah 53:4-7 predicted. Romans 5:8 is one of numerous New Testament passages that communicate the same thing about why Jesus died—"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Christ, as the demonstration of God's love, died in our place. Christ took upon Himself the penalty for sins that we deserve. Jesus willingly endured death and separation from God on our behalf. He died in our place in order that we might live—in order that we might have eternal life.

Illustration: Eight-year-old Monica broke her leg as she fell into a pit. An older woman, Mama Njeri, happened along and climbed into the pit to help get Monica out. In the process, a dangerous black Mamba snake bit both Mama Njeri and Monica. Monica was taken to a Medical Center and admitted. Mama Njeri went home, but never awoke from her sleep. The snake had bitten both of them, but all the snake's poison was expended on Mama Njeri. None was given to Monica. Jesus took the entire penalty for our sins upon Himself so that we could have new and eternal life through faith in Him. He died that we might live.

Jesus was resurrected, just as Psalm 16:10 predicted He would be. During Jesus' teaching ministry, He taught that those who trusted in Him would receive eternal life. Several passages of Scripture teach clearly that to be delivered from sin's penalty and to receive eternal life, a person must come to the end of trying to get to God by the good things they do, and trust in Christ alone in order to receive eternal life.

John 3:16 (NIV)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:36 (NIV)

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

John 6:40 (NIV)

"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 11:25 (NIV)

"...I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

Why is it so critical that we believe that the resurrection of Christ from the dead actually took place? If Jesus did not have victory over death Himself and did not arise from the dead, then how can we trust Him to give us eternal life? If Jesus did not arise from the dead, nothing He professed to be or do matters, because He is not all He claimed to be. Since Jesus is risen, He indeed is all He claimed to be and can be trusted in everything He says and does. We can trust Him to give us eternal life!

Believe that Jesus suffered and died for your sins and rose again three days later and trust in Him to give you eternal life and He will. As Scripture proclaims in Acts 16:31- "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

The Old Testament Scripture not only predicted the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the ministry of His disciples that would follow. Acts 26:22a-23 says, "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

He explains what Scripture predicts about their future ministry (47-49)

Their message: Repentance and forgiveness of sins (47a)

Christ's disciples are to call for repentance and to share the promise of forgiveness of sins for all those who do. The word translated repentance in Luke 24:47 literally means "a change of mind." What change of mind needs to occur for a person to be forgiven of sins? Verse 47 shows a clear connection between repentance and the name of Christ. If we haven't already done so, we need to change our mind concerning the Name of Christ—concerning who He is. Jesus instructed His disciples to preach our need to change our mindset from one of unbelief and rejection of Christ to one of trust in Him. When we change our mind about Christ in this way, then we have the joy and promise of forgiven sins.

Their mission: Preaching to all the nations (47b-48))

The message the Eleven were to preach was one of repentance concerning His Name with a view to forgiveness of sins. Their mission was to preach this message to all nations—even pagan Gentile nations.

Isaiah 49:6b predicted about the Christ—"I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

God intended for Israel to serve as a light to pagan nations living in darkness.

Isaiah 60:1-3- "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Unfortunately, Israel never did understand that the message of forgiveness of sins in the name of Messiah was always intended for pagans too. Israel failed in their mission. That mission has now been passed on to the church. How are we doing?

Why doesn't God just take us up to be with Him when we trust Christ? He doesn't because it is necessary that we remain to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. When we tell people about Christ, we are a part of the process of helping people turn to God. That is our role in God's plan. That is the role of each an every one of us who is in Christ—not just that of the Elders, Deacons, or Pastors.

God commissioned all of us to be witnesses of these things—His death, His resurrection, & the need to change one's mind about Christ, to trust in Christ in order to be forgiven of sins. God doesn't send us out as judges and prosecutors to condemn the world. He sends us as witness to point the way to Christ.

How could a group of sinful and often weak people fulfill such a commission?

Their might: Power of the Holy Spirit (49)

Before the Eleven go out on their mission to proclaim the gospel to the nations, they are to wait for the coming of what the Father promised. They are to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit who will clothe them with power from on high. Unless they wait on the Lord for His provision of power by the Holy Spirit, their mission will be ineffective. They have to depend on the Spirit's power if they are to be successful in the daunting task of reaching every nation. Just as Christ instructed them, the Eleven waited in Jerusalem until the coming of the Spirit to give them the power they needed for their mission. The Eleven were under the conviction that God is mighty to save and that it was critical to depend on Him. May God help us to have the same conviction.

Do we depend on the Spirit's power as the Eleven did? So many look at witnessing as something we do for God by our best efforts. When we do witnessing this way, we grow frustrated because of our ineffectiveness in reaching those who have not yet trusted Christ. Witnessing is not something we do for God by our best efforts, but it is something He does in and through us when we depend on the power of the Spirit. There is a big difference between a well devised sales talk we work up to make people see they need Christ and a Spirit-empowered witness we share as God provides the opportunity.

A practical way for us to depend on the power of God's Spirit in our witnessing is to pray. We need to pray for God to give us opportunities to share our faith. We need to pray that He will give us strength and courage for the task when the opportunities He provides come along. We need to pray that the LORD will prepare hearts first—the heart of those with whom He would have us share the gospel and our hearts as the ones sharing the good news.

I appreciate the following reminder from the late Dawson Trotman in the article he wrote entitled "Born to Reproduce":

Satan uses more tricks and traps to keep us from sharing our faith with others. He keeps us afraid that we won't know what to say or how to answer questions or objections. Maybe we'll blow it. Maybe they'll laugh or reject us. Witnessing is nothing more than telling someone what God has done for us. 'One beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' We don't have to know all the answers! When the Spirit of God has prepared the heart, that's all it takes. If the Spirit of God hasn't prepared the heart, all the arguments in the world won't move a person. We just need to live a consistent Christian life before our friends and family. Pray that God will open doors for us to share His love with others. Speak as the Spirit of God moves us. Let Him take care of the results."

We are witnesses of these things! How are we doing?