

# *Conversations with my friend, Byron*

## **Questions about Jesus**

As teenagers, Byron and I camped in the tent during summer vacation. We did it as only city boys know how. We had a long extension cord that plugged into the outdoor socket of the house so we could watch television and listen to the radio, as we lay on our soft comfy mattresses. We also dug a giant pit where we made a campfire and would talk about anything under the stars, most of the time girls. But one night, we talked about something we never have, we talked about Jesus. Here was the question that lay heavy on our hearts that evening. "What if Jesus came here right now?" As we pondered it we became afraid and hid in our tent. Why hide? I guess we thought the tent would somehow keep Jesus out! We were just afraid to face him because we knew that somehow he would not be pleased with us. Our experience represents the opinions of many when it comes to Jesus. People don't really want to see Jesus because they think he would not be pleased with them. The bottom line is that people don't want to be judged. I want to begin there as we ponder the person of Jesus. To many people, Jesus represents judgment. Yet the scriptures make it clear the purpose of Jesus coming to earth was not to judge people.

### **Jesus does not Approve of me: He wants to Condemn Me**

In our culture today, the verse most non-Christians are familiar with is the one that says, "Do not judge (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37)." We are very sensitive about being judged! I suspect that had something to do with Byron and I hiding in the tent. We somehow felt Jesus was coming to deliver some bad news. But the Bible teaches in John 3:16-17 that Jesus came to bring us good news.

16 "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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Here, Scripture teaches us two very important things about God and Jesus—whom many typically think about as judges. 1. Sending Jesus to earth was an act of God's great love. 2. That Jesus did not come to condemn the world; he came to save it. But for those of us who don't have any real background in Christianity, like Byron and I as teenagers, we think of him as someone waiting to judge us instead of wanting to save us. Now someone might argue that well if you don't believe in Jesus he will judge you. But if you read verse 18, the person that is responsible for the condemning is not God the Father or Jesus, the Son; it is the person who refuses to believe in Jesus. As we engage our culture for Jesus it is important to portray God as a lover of all people who wants to save the world through Jesus because they won't make it on their own. It is the rejection of that act that leads one to condemnation.

The reality is that most people don't want to have anything to do with Jesus, aside from a nighttime prayer. As a non-Christian for 27 years, I know what it is like to live without Jesus. It is not that I didn't like him; I just put him in the backburner because I had other things that were more pressing in my life, like my reputation, hitting the night clubs, and girls. I suspect besides those who are adamantly against Christianity, many people don't hate Jesus; they just aren't ready to give up the things in their life and replace them with Jesus. There is also another thing worth mentioning when it comes to this whole issue of being judged by Jesus.

We have this concept of hell being this place where you will burn forever and ever, like being in a torture chamber. But those are metaphors the Bible uses to explain how horrible it will be to live without God. Hell is best understood not as people having deep suntans, growing horns and becoming demons—instead it best described as a place separate from God. In other words, the very reason people choose not to believe in Jesus is because they prefer to live their life without him. Without God! The Bible teaches us that hell is a place that people prefer to go because they don't think they need Jesus to guide their life. They don't want to have anything to do with them. So in the end, they get what they always wanted; a life without God. A place where people can devour each other with selfishness and not have to ever worry about being judged by God.

## **Why does the Bible mention mostly the adult of Jesus and not his earlier years like other writings?**

The mistake Christians make here is usually discrediting other writings which claim to have childhood accounts of Jesus. One such book is known as the Gospel of Thomas, which tells events of Jesus getting mad at a kid for destroying his dam—and then proceeded to curse him until the other boy withered away until he was dead. Now, it is easy to get sidetracked by discrediting the gospel of Thomas instead of answering the question. Why isn't more mention of Jesus' life included in the Bible? The answer is that the biblical writers, inspired by God, were very select in what events they detailed. Aside from the virgin birth of Jesus and the account when he confounded the teachers at the temple when he was twelve, the Bible focus on the ministry of Jesus from the ages of 30 to 33. This is because the most significant things he did in his life began at the age of thirty.

I put it to Byron like this: If someone wrote a story about your life, aside from some childhood memories, the bulk of the bulk of the book would deal with the things that shaped your life in your adult life. In reality, the experiences we go through in our adulthood are significant in shaping what kind of person we are today. When Byron was a kid he beat me in a race wearing tan leather waffle stompers. When he was a teenager he had his first girlfriend. But when he was 20-40 he was married, raised three kids, got divorced, contemplated suicide, and began the process of putting his life back together. That, not Byron's childhood, is the story that shaped the life of Byron.

In the case of Jesus, what shaped his life was his ministry after his baptism at thirty, his miracles and sharing the gospel, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and his ascension to heaven. Those are the things the book is going to emphasize because they are the most significant for us today. Interestingly, at the end of John's gospel he explains that the life of Jesus consisted of many other events not recorded in Scripture.

### **John 21:25**

25 Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Make no mistake about it—Jesus did plenty more than the things we have read about. But of all those things, the authors had to narrow that list to the ones that are most significant. In the end those are the ones that changed our lives.

## **Why didn't Jesus appear to more people after he was raised?**

Here is a question you don't typically hear but it is a great one I always wondered about. It would seem that if he just called a town meeting throughout the cities in Palestine, it would have been more to his advantage. I mean if I were to throw a surprise party for a friend, the more people I contacted the greater the turnout would be. Byron even added more of a twist when he said why didn't Jesus just appear before his enemies and either give them a chance to repent or a chance to kill him again? We can go one further and simply ask why Jesus didn't just ascend high enough for everyone to see him, kind of like the Bat Signal? If I as a pastor had the opportunity to preach about the resurrection of Christ, I would rather do it in front of ten thousand people instead of the 513 people he choose according to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. What's up with that?

The best way to address this question is to look at a key passage in the Book of Acts after Jesus had been raised and ascended into heaven. Here, Peter is sharing the gospel with the first non-Jew to believe in Jesus.

### **Acts 10:30-43**

39 "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen-- by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

So, the people that Jesus appeared to were to be carefully chosen witnesses God the Father. In other words, these chosen ones were to be the power witnesses for God who would be able to reach others for Jesus like no others could. There are several more observations to be mentioned. First, after Jesus ascended into heaven the witnesses

were to meet together and wait for the Holy Spirit to be given. Jesus told them that this Holy Spirit would provide power for them to effectively proclaim the Good News of Jesus. We tend to view the Holy Spirit as just one that allows for miracles...but the much neglected ministry of the Spirit is to help us receive power to be effective witnesses as we share the Good News of Jesus.

#### **Acts 1:8**

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

And at just the right time—the day of Pentecost—Jews from all over the surrounding countries of Palestine came to gather together to celebrate this great feast. Then Peter, now filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the Good News of Jesus and over five thousand people repented and believed. That is five thousand believers who are now filled with the Holy Spirit. So here is what is happening. The Holy Spirit allowed the Good News of Jesus to spread far broader than if Jesus would have appeared to more people when he was alive. In fact, today, because of the power that the Holy Spirit provides, it has grown from a small following in Palestine to having the greatest number of followers in the world.

Secondly, God historically has used fewer people to accomplish His purposes, whether it be the prophets (1 Kings 19:18; Romans 11:2-5), the wars (Judges 7:1-7), or sharing the Good News of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:5-8) because it ultimately gives Him the glory and not his armies or followers. God accomplishes a lot with a little.

Thirdly, the thing God values the most from us is faith. As Christians we are to live by faith, not by sight. He just wants us to have faith that we can move mountains for Him. Historically, God has always blessed faithful people. In the gospel of John, Thomas, one of the disciples, refused to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead unless he saw Jesus and touched him. He needed proof. This is how Jesus responded to him.

#### **John 20:29-30**

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The reality is that there are only a number of people who saw the resurrected Jesus. God wanted it this way because He values faith. Faith is hoping for what is not yet visible.

Finally, the Scripture in Acts mentions that Jesus ate with his disciples and showed them through Bible study how even the Old Testament prophets agreed that forgiveness of sins comes through faith in Jesus. In all he had forty days to prepare them personally and scripturally to live without him as witnesses. You can best believe these forty days where an intense training period where a lot of information had to be processed. I imagine the Bible study must have been invigorating and that those forty days just flew by. In the end, Jesus wanted to make sure his witnesses were equipped thoroughly to be his witnesses.

### **You Can't Prove the Resurrection of Jesus; it is just is a matter of Faith**

We touched on this last week, but it is worth mentioning again. We live our life based on what we believe about the world, religion, politics, relationships, etc., etc. Christians tend to hear the phrase "you can't prove God," but it is not our job to prove God exists. It is not our job to prove that he doesn't exist. It is not really effective to argue that our position is true; our job is to be faithful. In saying that, our faith has some merit. There are historical records that affirm the reality of Jesus being crucified and raised. Here are some legitimate reasons why someone might conclude the resurrection is true.

- a. The gospels: The four authors validate that Jesus was raised from the dead. In fact, the Old Testament, written a thousand years earlier mentions a servant of God dying for our iniquities in Isaiah 53.
- b. Secular outside sources: Historians, who weren't Christians, and had no bias mention to some degree the existence of Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection. Two of the most significant were a Jewish Historian named Josephus, and one named Tacitus, who worked for the Romans.

- c. The Early Church Fathers: Let's just say these men had a choice. Recant what you believe about Jesus or become food for the lions. Many chose the lions. The others who did not, chose to be the fuel for being burnt at the stake. Some of these early church fathers, like Polycarp and Ignatius actually knew the disciples and continued their message.
- d. The Spread of the Church: This I think is the greatest testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. The church went from a small remnant to having the most people in any faith. There was a man in the New Testament named Gamaliel who was a respected member of the Sanhedrin. Anyhow, when the disciples Peter and John were arrested, the Jewish court was trying to figure out how to punish them. It was here where the Jewish Pharisee and respected member of the Sanhedrin, stated to let those men go because if they are not from God, their message would fail like all the other Jewish revolutionaries like Theudas and Judas the Galilean. Well, the reality is the message did not die, even with the deaths of the apostle. Like I mentioned, today it has the most followers of any faith.

Yet, as legitimate as these reasons may seem, they will not convince an unbeliever to believe in the Good News of Jesus. Apologetics can only take a person so far. You do not want to defend your position to the point where you get into a heated argument. Instead, you want to respectfully tell others the reasons you have for believing in Jesus with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15-17). Respectfully share what you believe without arguing. In the end, it is up to God to do the rest. He just wants us to be faithful to sharing respectfully the hope we have in Jesus.