

Easter Sunday

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The Resurrection

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THE RESURRECTION

FOR THOSE TIRED OF PLAYING THE ANGLES

MATTHEW 28:1-15

I.

One of the items on the coronavirus news front this week was China's treatment of Italy. It seems that when the coronavirus situation in China became serious, the Italian government sent several tons of personal protective equipment to China as a donation to help their medical workers in the hardest hit areas of the country. This week China sent some of the same stuff back to Italy--- only they made the Italians pay for it.

It seems like China has been playing the angles in this pandemic. They were slow to reveal to the world what was happening at the beginning of the appearance of the virus. Some in their foreign ministry tried to accuse the US military of being responsible for introducing the virus. They apparently continue to cover up the full extent of the epidemic in China. Now they are supplying medical supplies to several parts of the world. Unfortunately in Spain it seems that most of the test kits they sent don't work. The angle that the Chinese government seems to be playing is that they are on top of the situation, they have been effective in squelching the virus, and now they are being generous to the rest of the world. We Chinese Communists are really good guys.

Here in the US, elements in both political parties are playing the political angle of this pandemic, trying to make themselves look good and the other guys look bad for how they have responded to this crisis. Sometimes in our world it seems like everyone is playing an angle. People are pursuing their career or hobby or sport or political interest or relationship or even religion motivated by a desire for money or power or physical gratification. And people too often don't worry about the methods that they use to obtain these goals.

Several years ago the Barna Research Group conducted a survey of the attitude of Americans toward nine different social institutions. The attitudes were not especially encouraging. At the bottom of the totem pole was the media. Only 10% of people expressed high confidence in the integrity of the media.

Ranked only slightly higher was the Congress. The next ranking up the scale was private business. The institution that ranked highest of the nine was the military, with 58% of surveyed Americans expressing a lot confidence in our armed forces.

This American cynicism filters down into our school system. Carol Horner returned to an eighth grade classroom in one North Carolina school several years ago after a thirteen year absence from teaching. In a *New York Times* article she said, **“When I started teaching, the parent would back up the teacher. Now, most parents work under the assumption that their child has been wronged.”** She went on to add, **“Nobody trusts the government. Nobody trusts anybody. This filters down to our kids. They don’t trust anybody either.”**

In the Barna poll, churches scored better than most of the other institutions. But still only 43% of Americans expressed a lot of confidence in churches. Churches and religion have gotten bad press in recent years. Some of it is justified. Hundreds of Catholic priests around the country and in other parts of the world have been implicated in child molestation cases involving thousands of children. There have been problems in Protestant churches as well.

Some of the religious programming on TV and the radio seems worthwhile. But then some of these broadcasters push hard for money. When we occasionally hear about these religious types living in mansions and flying around the country in their own private jets, one has to wonder about the angle that they are really playing. Are they doing what they are doing to serve God, or are they playing an angle for money and power?

II.

When the Son of God entered the world and took on the body and nature of a human being, He found a lot to be criticized in the religion of His day, too. In fact He engaged in a CONFRONTATION WITH RELIGION. If you are a compulsive note taker, I have labeled everything in my outline up until now as Roman numeral I., Introduction. Now we are at Roman numeral II., CONFRONTATION WITH RELIGION.

Jesus saw that the religious leaders were playing the angles. Their primary angle was power, although some of them also accumulated a lot of money. The priests in Jerusalem had a monopoly on the sale of animals for sacrifice, and they also controlled the banking system. But these religious leaders were especially concerned about maintaining their religious authority. They also wanted to keep the

considerable power that the Romans allowed them to have in regard to civil authority. Jesus came to be perceived as a threat to all of this religious power.

Jesus came along presenting Himself as the Old Testament Messiah. Such a claim could hardly be overlooked by the religious elite, especially when that claim was accompanied by reports of healings and miracles. But this Jesus just would not play their religious games. He refused to follow their traditions. He didn't actually break the Old Testament Law, but He sure did break a lot of their religious rules.

The religious leaders were especially sensitive to rules that they had set up to interpret the Fourth Commandment that prohibited work on the Sabbath. Jesus kept healing people on the Sabbath. Often He didn't even raise a finger in doing those miracles, but the leaders were convinced that healing people had to be work and was therefore a violation of God's Sabbath law. Jesus didn't make His disciples wash their hands in quite the way that they were supposed to wash their hands either. Anybody who showed such disrespect to their religious tradition could not be the genuine item, so they thought.

The religious leaders tried to figure out Jesus' angle. When one's life comes to be dominated by playing the angles, then one begins to think that everybody else has an angle. Everybody else has some kind of selfish motive. But the religious leaders had a hard time figuring out what Jesus' angle was. They seemed not to criticize Him for wanting money or sex, although they did attack Him for hanging around with the tax collectors and prostitutes.

One classic confrontation over this issue involved the Pharisees, who were a dominant group among the religious leaders. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. They didn't like either Jesus or John the Baptist, who had identified Jesus as the Messiah. In Luke #7 we are told, **"But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, not having been baptized by John."** John the Baptist was a prophet character who attracted a popular following and called upon people to turn back to the true God. He also proclaimed that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah.

Jesus is quoted in Luke #7 as saying, **"To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children who sit in the market place and call to one another, and they say, 'We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.' For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you [Pharisees] say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!'"**

The angle of the Pharisees is clear. They want to stay in power and stop the missions of Jesus and John. But in trying to do that, Jesus exposes their hypocrisy. So what do they say about Jesus' angle? He hangs out with the wrong crowd and has too much fun. But what motivates and empowers Him? There has to be some explanation for His demonstrations of miraculous power. Too many people have witnessed dramatic healings, even a couple of incidents where people were raised from the dead. Their conclusion is that Jesus is working for Satan. Jesus wants power just like everybody else, and He is getting His special abilities from the devil. So He has to go.

Jesus foresaw this development. Ultimately it was part of the plan of God. According to the Gospel records, Jesus told His disciples several times beforehand that the religious leaders were going to have Him killed. He even said that He would rise from the dead on the third day after His death. The twelve disciples had a hard time accepting that notion. They didn't want to hear it. They put it right out of their minds. Only later would they remember His words.

III.

The end result of Jesus' confrontation with religion is CRUCIFIXION, which is Roman numeral III. in my outline. After three years of public ministry, tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders began to come to a head. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, a few days before the Passover, and crowds of people were hailing Him as the Messiah. The religious leaders couldn't let this go on much longer. There might be a popular uprising. The Romans maintained a military garrison in Judea. They were content to let the Jews largely govern themselves, as long as they paid their taxes and did not stir up trouble. If Roman intervention was required, the religious leaders might lose some of their power.

Fortunately they found an ally in one of the twelve disciples. Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve, but he was not really committed to Jesus. You see, he was playing the angles. Part of his motivation may have been political. He was unhappy that the Jews were under the authority of the Romans. In the beginning Judas may have seen Jesus as a man who would lead a popular uprising against those nasty Gentile foreigners. If he succeeded, there might be a position of power in it for Judas.

But then Judas also liked money. Somehow he became treasurer for the band of disciples. The Apostle John tells us in his gospel that Judas used to steal from the money that had been donated to their cause. So Judas had a money angle, too.

At some point during this week in Jerusalem Judas had a little chat with the chief priests. They agreed to give him thirty pieces of silver if Judas would help them apprehend Jesus when the crowds weren't around. The deal was struck, and during the Passover meal, probably on Thursday evening, Judas excused himself and went to tell the priests that Jesus was going to be in Gethsemane, just to the east of Jerusalem, later that evening. While Jesus was praying and His disciples were dozing off, Judas showed up with a mob led by the religious authorities. They arrested Jesus and hauled him off for a hearing.

They took Jesus back into the city to the home of the high priest. There they had a trial of sorts. What took place violated their own legal tradition in a number of ways, including the fact that it was held at night. But they were intent on getting rid of Jesus.

Still they had trouble even with their own kangaroo court. The Biblical text says that there was false and obviously inconsistent testimony against Jesus. Finally they got Jesus to say that He was God, and they had what they needed. In claiming to be God, Jesus was guilty of blasphemy. The Old Testament said that blasphemers should be stoned to death.

There was, however, still a problem. The political situation was such that only the Romans could give permission for people to be executed. So the religious leaders had to get the OK from the Roman governor, who was Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the governor of the Roman province of Judea. Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast was the capital of Judea, but Pilate was in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. While it was still early morning, they roused Pilate and got him involved.

Pilate did not much care about matters of Jewish religious law and charges of blasphemy. He didn't much care for the Jews. But Pilate's angle was to stay in power and keep the Roman emperor happy. His focus was on keeping the peace. If things in Judea stayed quiet and calm, he would be OK.

The religious leaders knew Pilate's angle. So they framed the problem in terms of Jesus' claim to be king of the Jews. They said to him, **"If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar; every one who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar."**

Were the Jews upset about someone who opposed Caesar? No. Caesar was a pagan, a Gentile. He collect taxes from the Jews. For the most part, the Jews hated the Romans. But the religious leaders wanted Jesus dead, and they knew the right buttons to push and the correct angle to use against the

Roman governor. Pilate was left with little choice. He couldn't afford a charge like this to get back to Rome. He ordered the crucifixion to proceed.

The circumstances of this crucifixion were not exactly ordinary. The Bible says that there was a strange darkness that covered the land in the hours preceding Jesus' death. Then at the moment of Jesus' death there was an earthquake. Those celestial events, combined with the response of Jesus to His suffering, prompted the Roman centurion supervising the execution to respond, **"Truly this was the Son of God."**

We find out also that the veil in the temple separating the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant from the Holy Place in the outer part of the temple was torn in half at the time of the earthquake, at the moment of Jesus' death. The significance of this was not lost on the priests in the temple, some of whom were moved to become followers of Jesus. Jesus' death meant that access had now been granted to God's people to enter into the presence of God without priests and without sacrifices. Jesus had died for the sins of the world. The barrier of sin separating man from God had been removed.

IV.

We move then from the story of the crucifixion to the story of THE RESURRECTION, Roman numeral IV. It is one thing to die, and even to control some of the circumstances of one's death. It is quite another thing to rise from the dead. Houdini has the reputation in many quarters for being the greatest illusionist in history. He had a certain fascination with death. Before he died, he promised that he would do all in his power after he died to escape the clutches of death, or at least to make contact with the living. He gave a secret signal to his wife. If she ever heard this secret password, or whatever the signal was, after he died, she could know that her husband was contacting her from beyond the grave. His wife never got that signal.

Jesus had predicted that He would rise from the grave on the third day. The religious leaders had some awareness of that prediction. They did not believe it for one minute. But they were concerned that the disciples of Jesus might be playing the angles. Maybe they might try to steal the body.

So in the last part of Matthew #27 (vv. 62-66) we read about what they did on Saturday: **"Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with**

Pilate, and said, 'Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, "After three days I am to rise again." Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, "He has risen from the dead," and the last deception will be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.' And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone."

The religious leaders thought that they had everything covered. But they had omitted one possibility from their consideration. That possibility was that Jesus was the Messiah, that Jesus was God who had become man, and that He might indeed rise from the dead.

You heard (or perhaps read) a little earlier from Matthew 28 the story of the women coming to the tomb on Easter Sunday. A severe earthquake had happened. The stone sealing the grave had been rolled away by an angel. The guards saw him do it. They were scared to death. They ran off to tell the authorities what had happened. The women also encountered the angel. They, too, were afraid. But the angel told them not to be afraid. He said that Jesus had risen, and they were to tell the disciples about it.

The Roman guards now had a new angle on this whole situation. That angle was to preserve their lives. They could be executed for letting the stone be rolled away and letting the body of Jesus somehow get out. Who would believe their story about seeing an angel? So they went first to the chief priests rather than to Pilate.

Beginning in v. 12 of #28 in Matthew we read, **"And when they had assembled with the elders and counseled together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, 'You are to say, "His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep." And if this should come to the governor's ears--- for a Roman soldier sleeping at his post could be executed--- we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.'** And they took the money and did, as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day."

I don't know what the priests and the rabbis thought about the story of the soldiers. But when you get so wrapped up in playing the angles and looking out for your own position of power, you lose interest in the truth. The concern is only for self-protection. So they paid off and covered up. They thought that they also could convince others to believe that the disciples of Jesus were also playing the angles, that they were deceiving people by stealing the body of Jesus.

The success of the religious leaders was limited, however. Christianity grew up there in Jerusalem, shortly after the resurrection. The disciples of Jesus knew what had happened. They saw Jesus dead, and they saw Him alive again. They were willing to stake their lives on the truth claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Their critics were never able to produce the body of Jesus.

Simon Greenleaf was a Harvard professor in the nineteenth century. He wrote a book on the rules of legal evidence that became the standard textbook on the subject in law schools. He also wrote a book entitled *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*. In it he concluded this about the resurrection: **“It was therefore impossible that [the disciples] could have persisted in affirming the truths that have been narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact. If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error. To have persisted in so gross a falsehood, after it was known to them, was not only to encounter, for life, all the evils which man could inflict, from without, but to endure also the pangs of inward and conscious guilt; with no hope of future peace, no testimony of a good conscience, no expectation of honor or esteem among men, no hope of happiness in this life, or in the world to come... If then their testimony was not true, there was not possible motive for its fabrication.”**

V.

We come then in my outline to Roman numeral V. and WHAT IS GOD’S ANGLE IN ALL OF THIS? There is a verse familiar to many of us that comes from John’s Gospel. It goes like this: **“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.”** The claim is that God loves us and wants us to have eternal life. The obstacle is human sin. The death of the God-man Jesus was necessary to satisfy the wrath of a righteous God against sin.

If Jesus truly was, and is, God as well as man, then He could not stay in the grave. The resurrection also gives proof to the claim of Jesus, also recorded in John’s Gospel, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”** Jesus is the only way to heaven. There are not many roads to heaven. If there was another way by which people could get to heaven, it would be a very cruel thing for God the Father to send His Son to die a horrible death upon the cross.

Just before Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the only way to God the Father, He said, **“Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me.”** The one requirement necessary for us to experience

peace with God, to be reconciled to God the Father, to have forgiveness of sins is belief. We have to place our trust in Jesus Christ. We have to depend upon Him for eternal life.

The coronavirus is on the minds of all of us. The natural question is: What is God's angle in all of this? If God is truly sovereign and all-powerful, what possible purpose can this pandemic serve? A lot of people are dying because of it. All of our lives are disrupted because of it. The New Testament commands Christians to meet together. It is difficult to do that without risking the health of one another and our neighbors in the community.

I don't claim to be a prophet, but it would seem to me that this virus deal is forcing families to be together. There should be some good things about this. Parents have to connect with their kids in a closer way, if they don't drive each other crazy. For some among us, the economic hit from the coronavirus is really tough. But perhaps there is an angle that God would want us to catch that has to do with not putting too much of our energy and attention and focus on money and business and the economy.

Then I suspect that God has an angle that He wants to remind us all of our mortality. Steve Jobs, a year after his pancreatic cancer diagnosis, told the commencement crowd at the Stanford University graduation in 2005, **"[Death is] very likely the best invention of life. All pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure, these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."**

It would seem to me that in the face of death it is very important to know what is going to happen after death. It would seem reasonable that if there is indeed a God who has something to say about how and where we will spend eternity that we make a connection with Him, that we fulfill whatever responsibility that we have before our Creator to be accepted by Him. The claim of Christianity is that we must put our trust in the Son of God, the God-man Jesus Christ, who died to pay the penalty for our sins and rose again to show that He truly was and is God.

Adoniram Judson grew up in the home of a Congregationalist pastor in Massachusetts in the late 1700s. He was a bright kid. By the time that he was ten he already was studying advanced math and understood the basics of Latin and Greek. At age 16 his dad, a Yale graduate, sent Adoniram to college in Rhode Island at what would become Brown University.

Although he had grown up in a pastor's home, he had never really embraced the faith of his parents. At Brown Adoniram was interested in literature and drama. He did not participate in any Christian activities. His best friend was Jacob Eames, who was a year older and was a Deist by religious inclination. The two of them studied together and partied together. Jacob and Adoniram did drama together. They developed a similar philosophy of life.

Adoniram graduated in 1807. He returned to Massachusetts but was very restless. He didn't enjoy the Christian influence of his family. So he headed off to New York, with the hope of developing a career in the theater. His parents were not thrilled. In New York he was unable to get any traction with an acting or theater career. In the late summer of 1807 he decided that his only option was to head back to Massachusetts.

According to the *Influenza Encyclopedia*, produced by the University of Michigan, there was a major flu epidemic that struck the eastern seaboard of the US in 1807. It struck in the summer and fall of that year. One doctor in the Hudson Valley claimed that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population in that area were infected by it. Many died.

On the first night of Adoniram's trip back home he stayed in a wayside inn. There was only one room available. The innkeeper warned Adoniram that there was a young man next door who was very sick. He took the room, but he had a hard time sleeping that night. There were groans and moans and the sounds of someone entering and leaving the room next door. Adoniram later recalled that he thought about death and the fate of his neighbor next door and what his father said about death. He had fearful thoughts about his own destiny. Then he thought about what his college friends, especially Jacob Eames, would say. They would laugh at his concerns.

The next morning after breakfast he paid his bill and prepared to leave. He asked the innkeeper how his neighbor next door was faring. The man replied that he died. Adoniram asked a bit more and was told that his neighbor was a Brown University graduate, a young fellow by the name of Eames, Jacob Eames. It was his best friend. He was shaken. The thought that kept going through his mind was "Lost. Lost for eternity." Before the day was out, Adoniram embraced the faith of his father. He was convinced that his father's God had providentially arranged the circumstances of his experience the previous night. He embraced Jesus and the God of the Bible. Eventually Adoniram Judson became a pioneering missionary in Burma. (Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson*)

The coronavirus epidemic could likewise serve as a wakeup call to some among us. Just because much of the world and most of the people around us are playing the angles--- looking out for #1, seeking money or power or sex or popularity or whatever--- we don't have to play their game. We can buy into the truth. The resurrection of Jesus is evidence of the truth of Christianity. The only angle that Jesus was playing was love for the world, love for you and for me.

If you would like to make sure that you have forgiveness of sins and eternal life, I am going to offer a simple prayer that expresses the kind of faith that is necessary to believe in Jesus. I invite you to pray along with me:

“Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner. I believe that You are the Son of God who became a man and died for my sins. I trust you now as my Savior, and welcome you into my life. Thank you for loving me. Amen.”

The Bible says in 1 John #5, **“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the son of God in order that you may know that you have eternal life.”** If you were sincere in praying that prayer, if you truly have believed in Jesus, you can know right now that you have eternal life. We would be happy to hear about it. You can contact us via our website. We would love to send you something in the mail to encourage you in your Christian walk.