

Lesson 3

Keeping the Main Thing, the Main Thing

If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen – nothing else matters.

- Jaroslav Pelikan¹

I recently read a story about 2 men on a bridge. One was getting ready to jump and the other was doing his best to talk him out of it.²

Rescuer: Are you a Christian or a Jew or a Hindu or what?

Jumper: A Christian.

Rescuer: Small world! Me too. Protestant or Catholic or Greek Orthodox?

Jumper: Protestant.

Rescuer: Me too! What franchise?

Jumper: Baptist.

Rescuer: Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?

Jumper: Northern Baptist.

Rescuer: Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?

Jumper: Northern Conservative Baptist.

Rescuer: Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist, Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist, Easter Region?

Jumper: Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist, Great Lakes Region.

Rescuer: Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?

Jumper: Northern Conservative Fundamental Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.

Rescuer: Die heretic! (Pushes him off the bridge)

You may laugh at this little story, but far too often it is an accurate description of life in the church. It's easy to spend so much time hashing out important, yet minor points of theology that we lose sight of the main thing – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Consider the words of Paul to the church at Corinth,

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”³

Talk about laying it all on the line! Paul says that if Christ did not actually rise from the dead, then Christianity is just a massive hoax! Nowhere else in Scripture do we find such a bold challenge to those seeking to disprove Christianity. And yet, despite growing up in the church, it was not until I entered graduate school that I heard the resurrection of Jesus defended from an

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Yale Department of History Newsletter*, Spring (2007), 3.

² Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004) 43-44.

³ I Corinthians 15:14, 17.

apologetic standpoint as the lynchpin of Christianity. I even had a Bible college professor give an outline of the Gospel for evangelistic purposes that did not include the resurrection!

Christians often spend immense time dealing with Darwinian evolution, the age of the earth, and how any government system besides a democratic republic cannot be blessed by God. These are certainly important issues, but for the Christian apologist, the weight of Scripture demands significant attention be given to historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. While Christians should be challenged to investigate this fact as the basis of their faith, it also provides a springboard for evangelistic discussions with those who find miracles unscientific and impossible.

Tonight's format will follow a simple 2-step procedure:

- 1) Establish the historical facts surrounding the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth
- 2) Examine the possible explanations for the previously established facts

Tonight's lesson will equip you to invite your skeptical friends to simply examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus – the most important event in all of Christianity. Some miracle claims are simply beyond historical investigation, for example, the virgin birth. However, concerning the most important miracle in the Bible, the resurrection of Jesus, God has given us literally an unprecedented amount of evidence! We will explore the sovereignly preserved evidence surrounding the life of Jesus that makes the resurrection one of, if not the best, attested events in all of history.

There are 2 criteria for each fact used tonight: (1) Each fact must have multiple lines of evidence supporting it. When dealing with historical events from 2000 years ago, multiple lines of evidence for a given fact are simply not found very frequently. Paul Maier, professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University comments, "Many facts from antiquity rest on just one source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable."⁴ (2) Each fact is granted by an overwhelming majority of scholars in the field, regardless of their religious beliefs. This second criteria is less important than the first because the majority of scholars have been wrong throughout history at many points. However, that the majority of historians, whether atheist, agnostic, Muslim, or otherwise grant these facts speaks to the good evidence that supports them. Just because skeptics reject much of the Bible does not mean they reject all of it. The 4 facts we will examine tonight are:

1. Jesus really lived, and died by crucifixion.
2. Jesus' disciples believed that he rose and appeared to them.
3. Jesus' tomb was empty.
4. The Christian church was birthed and rapidly grew immediately following Jesus' life and death.

Fact #1: Jesus Really Lived, and Died by Crucifixion

⁴ Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 197.

This fact might seem elementary to some, but it is vitally important. For someone to rise, they must not only be dead, but they must have truly existed! While Jesus' existence as a historical person is not doubted by scholars today, it was doubted within the last 100 years. That so many scholars have switched their position speaks to the strength of the evidence for the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Bart Ehrman is a historian who classifies himself as an atheist leaning agnostic; Ehrman's research led him to discover 17 independent reliable historical sources for Jesus' life and subsequent death by crucifixion.⁵ This is staggering! Remember that many historical facts rest on a single source and if two or three sources are available, then the fact is considered irrefutable. Ehrman's conclusion is that "The denial that Christ was crucified is like the denial of the Holocaust. For some it's simply too horrific to affirm. For others it's an elaborate conspiracy to coerce religious sympathy. But the deniers live in a historical dream world."⁶ John Dominic Crossan was co-founder of the Jesus Seminar – an extremely liberal group seeking to cast doubt on the life and works of Jesus. Crossan personally believes that the Gospels are to be read as fictional parables, yet he says there is not "the slightest doubt about the fact of Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate."⁷ That Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under Pontius Pilate is one of the most firmly established facts in all of history.

Given the strong evidence for Jesus' crucifixion, some have tried to argue that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. Unfortunately, these assertions have been met with nearly unanimous harsh criticisms from countless credible sources. The ancient Roman practice of crucifixion was one of the most efficient execution models employed in history. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported, "interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."⁸ Continuing the strong criticism for this view was Dr. David Barnardo, who practices in London at Queen Mary's University Hospital, "The authors (of apparent death theory articles) quite rightly state that 'faith does not require the abandonment of thought' but in stretching credulity to the limit they appeal to this very thing!"⁹ It appears the denial of Jesus' death on the cross is driven not by evidence, but personal biases. To use a famous statement attributed to Ben Franklin, "we have another theory murdered by a brutal gang of facts."¹⁰

Fact #2: Jesus' Disciples Believed that He Rose and Appeared to Them

The post mortem appearances represent powerful evidence because Jesus appeared to skeptics and disciples as well as large groups, small groups, and individuals. Further, his appearances occurred in various locations. Arguably the best text for establishing these appearances is I

⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 141.

⁶ Bart Ehrman interview with Reginald V. Finley Sr., "Who Changed the New Testament and Why", The Infidel Guy Show, 2008. Excerpt can be found at: <http://www.city-data.com/forum/religion-spirituality/1264542-did-jesus-exist.html#ixzz2pvePXTT1>.

⁷ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 375.

⁸ Edwards WD, Gabel WJ, Hosmer FE. On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ. *JAMA*. 1986;255(11):1455-1463.

⁹ Quoted in Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 315.

¹⁰ This statement has also been attributed to T. H. Huxley and Francois La Rochefoucauld. Quote taken from Licona, 318.

Corinthians 15:3-8,

³“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

This account is considered reliable for numerous reasons. First, the structure of the verses indicate Paul was quoting a creed that would have been memorized in the early church. I Corinthians was written around 55 A. D. – roughly 25 years after Jesus’ death.¹¹ In I Corinthians 15:3, Paul says he is merely passing along the information he had previously received, so the creed must be dated prior to A. D. 55. When exactly did Paul learn of the creed? The most probable explanation is found in Galatians 1, where Paul says he spent about two weeks with Peter and James confirming the message of the Gospel. Paul says this event took place three years after his conversion. So at a maximum, the creed existed three years after Paul’s conversion, which is generally thought to have happened one or two years after Jesus’ death. This is amazing evidence, but for the creed to exist at Paul’s Jerusalem meeting, it had to have started even earlier. Most scholars agree that this creed originated less than 3 years after Jesus’ death, with some concluding that it started mere months after the fact. The previously mentioned Jesus Seminar concluded that this creed was established within “two or three years at the most.”¹² John Rodgers adds, “This is the sort of data that historians of antiquity drool over.”¹³

Think about how incredible this is! We do not have any written documentation from the life of Alexander the Great until 350 years after his death, yet we have a consensus of scholars that people claimed to see the risen Jesus a mere 2 years after the event! The extremely early date means that there simply was not time for errors to creep into the text. But, you might ask, what evidence is in I Corinthians 15 to indicate that the post mortem appearances actually happened? We will categorize the appearances by the identity of the people who claimed to have seen Jesus as well as the quantity of people who claimed to have seen Jesus.

Identity of People Claiming To See Jesus

A minimum of three distinct, significant identities can be seen from the various Scriptural accounts: (1) Disciples (2) Non-believers, and (3) Women. Together, these form a powerful argument for the reality of Jesus’ resurrection. Modern critics anticipate the disciples claiming to see the risen Jesus, yet the other two groups pose serious problems for the skeptic.

¹¹ ESV Study Bible, 2187.

¹² Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 466.

¹³ Quoted in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*,. 53.

We know that prior to Paul's conversion, he was an aggressive persecutor and murderer of Christians.¹⁴ While an instantaneous, radical worldview shift is improbable, Paul's prior vocation made him patently aware of the consequences of his decision. Persecution up to the point of a brutal death could be expected, yet he possessed incredible certainty of his message and boldness in its proclamation. Additionally, James the brother of Jesus was a skeptic who converted following Jesus' appearance to him.¹⁵ Like Paul, James knew the fate of those who turned from Judaism to Christianity. After becoming one of the most prominent leaders in the early church, James was martyred for his faith.¹⁶ So, we have 2 examples of men who did not believe in Jesus and shortly after his death came to believe that he was God incarnate. They made this radical change in belief despite knowing that their decision would cause significant persecution, possibly even a gruesome death.

The other significant group of people to whom Jesus appeared is women. While not specifically mentioned in the I Corinthians 15 account, several Gospel accounts cite women as the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection.¹⁷ This is significant because of the low view of women commonly held in the first century. The Jewish Talmud stated, "Sooner let the words of the law be burnt than delivered to women."¹⁸ That is crazy talk! Further, in a court of law, it took the testimony of two women to overturn the testimony of one man. Listen to the words of Jewish historian Josephus, "let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex ... since it is probable that they may not speak truth."¹⁹ Had Paul and the Gospel writers been making up a hoax, they would have sought to build a story that had as much credibility as possible. Citing women as the eyewitnesses would do nothing except detract credibility from the resurrection stories. This fact lends an especially high degree of credibility to the Gospel accounts that cite women as the *first* eyewitnesses. No first century author creating a false tale would create women as his first eyewitnesses.

Clearly, Jesus appeared to people with many distinct and significant identities. His appearances to disciples, non-believers, and women lend historical credibility to the accounts recorded in Scripture.

Quantity of People Claiming To See Jesus

In addition to the identity of those to whom Jesus appeared, the quantity of people to whom Jesus appeared gives historical credibility to the I Corinthians account. Keep in mind that I Corinthians 15:3-6 can be traced to within 2 years of the crucifixion – and this claim is not in the least bit controversial, even amongst the most liberal and skeptical scholars. I Corinthians 15:3-6 records that Jesus appeared to several individuals, a small group, and a large group. Paul anticipates that

¹⁴ Acts 7-8, among others.

¹⁵ James' unbelief is documented in Mark 3:20-35, Mark 6:2-4, John 7:1-5. Additional support is found in inferences from John 7:7 and 15:18-19, and John 19:25-27.

¹⁶ James martyrdom is not recorded in Scripture, but is attested by ancient church fathers such as Eusebius and Clement of Caesarea. Additional documentation is found in the writings of Josephus and Hegesippus.

¹⁷ Matthew 28:5-10, Mark 16:9-11, John 20:11-18. Luke's account does not mention Jesus appearing to the women, but he does cite the women by name who were the first to arrive at the tomb (24:10-11).

¹⁸ Talmud, Sotah 19a, quoted in Habermas and Licona, 72.

¹⁹ Josephus, Antiquities, 4.8.15, quoted in Habermas and Licona, 72.

some will object to his claim of Jesus' resurrection by challenging the skeptic to seek out the eyewitnesses. He does this by identifying them by name and by saying, "most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep."²⁰ In essence, Paul is saying, 'If you doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, feel free to go talk to all of these eyewitnesses. They were there when he appeared and can tell you about it.' That Paul records these appearances to differing groups of people is significant in dispelling one of the most common alternate hypotheses for Jesus resurrection: the hallucination theory.

Fact #3: The Empty Tomb

There are many reasons to believe the tomb was empty just as the Gospels report, but we will focus on three of them today: the empty tomb is supported by some of the most credible sources in the 1st century, the first skeptic's arguments against Jesus resurrection assumed the empty tomb, and the lack of mythological or legendary elements in the Gospel accounts.

Credible Sources Support the Empty Tomb

We have already discussed why I Corinthians 15 is one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. Legitimately tracing a 2,000 year old book's writing to within 6-24 months of the actual events is literally unprecedented. I Corinthians 15:4 says, "that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Think about what has just been established!! We started in the New Testament, the best attested collection of books in all of antiquity. Then, we zoomed in to I Corinthians 15:3-6, without a doubt the most documented and verified section of the New Testament. Here, in I Corinthians 15:4, we find an account of the empty tomb. All this is to say that the I Corinthians passage alone gives us great reasons for believing the tomb was empty.

Most scholars agree that Mark's passion narrative can be traced to within at least seven years of the crucifixion.²¹ This might seem like a long time compared to our outstanding evidence for I Corinthians 15, but we must keep in mind last week's lesson to realize how truly remarkable this documentation is for Mark's passion narrative. Mark's account documents the empty tomb and we therefore have some of the most credible evidence in all of antiquity pointing toward the empty tomb.

Earliest Anti-Resurrection Arguments Assumed the Empty Tomb

Matthew 28:12-15 says,

"¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep,' ¹⁴and if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."

²⁰ I Corinthians 15:6

²¹ William Lane Craig, "The Resurrection and the Historical Jesus" (Lecture, Johnson Ferry Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, April 5-6, 2013).

So, the 1st century eyewitnesses who rejected Jesus built their anti-resurrection argument around the fact that the tomb was empty. They knew that nobody would believe them if they said the tomb was not empty, so they were forced to invent an explanation that included the empty tomb. Does it not seem strange that we would today, 2000 years later, decide that the 1st skeptical eyewitnesses did not know the facts as well as we do today? That the earliest anti-resurrection arguments presuppose the empty tomb constitutes a second good reason to believe it was actually empty.

Lack of Mythological or Legendary Elements in the Gospel Narratives

This argument may seem a big abstract or vague on first glance, but it is actually quite powerful. When scholars investigate ancient texts, they look for parts of the story that are so outlandish that they were clearly added to the story. If such examples are found, then the scholars have found good evidence that the authors stopped reporting the facts in an attempt to persuade readers of their story. A second option would be that someone came along after the events and changed the story. If, however, no mythological or legendary elements are found, we have good reason to believe that the authors are actually telling the truth, not trying to persuade the readers of a lie. It is helpful to see an example of such embellishments in contrast to the Gospel accounts. Consider the resurrection account recorded in the Gospel of Peter, which was not written by Peter, but an unknown author, roughly 100 years after Jesus' death,

“³⁵Now in the night in which the Lord's day dawned, when the soldiers, two by two in every Watch were keeping guard, there rang out a loud voice in heaven, ³⁶and they saw the heavens opened and two men come down from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulcher. ³⁷That stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulcher started to roll and give way to the side, and the sepulcher was opened, and both the young men entered in. ³⁸When now those soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders – for they also were there to assist at the watch. ³⁹And whilst they were relating what they had seen, they saw three men come out from the sepulcher, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, ⁴⁰and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heavens. ⁴¹And they heard a voice out of the heavens crying, ‘Thou hast preached to them that sleep,’ ⁴²and from the cross there was heard the answer, ‘Yea.’”²²

So, this account says that a booming heavenly voice opened the clouds and two angels descended in plain view. Then, the thousand-pound stone somehow rolled itself up the hill and away from the tomb. After that, the angels went into the tomb and helped Jesus out. Apparently the angels heads reached into the clouds, and Jesus head reached above the clouds and was out of sight. Additionally, the cross of Calvary was dragging itself behind the three of them. At this point, another voice from heaven boomed, “Thou hast preached to them that sleep.” And catch this, none of the angels responded and Jesus did not respond. No worries, though! The wooden cross responded and said to the heavenly voice, “Yea.”

²² Rowland Croucher, “The Resurrection and the Gospel of Peter”, <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/9109.htm>, April 17, 2013.

What a story!! Nowhere in any Gospel account do we find such an astonishing account of the events. It is clear that whoever wrote this account was attempting to embellish it to make the event look literally larger-than-life. The nature of such accounts demonstrates how absurd late developing legends tend to become. However, such wild details are unmistakably absent in all 5 canonical accounts of the resurrection. Rather, the Gospels read in plain language and even record seemingly trivial details about the life of Christ and His disciples. This absence of legendary elements was crucial in the conversion of the famous chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University, C. S. Lewis. Lewis states, “I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.”²³

This example should also strengthen our confidence in the reliable transmission of the New Testament. Were we to find examples such as the Gospel of Peter in the New Testament, we might conclude that it was not reliable. Rather, the New Testament is 100% internally consistent and reports events as they actually occurred, without inventing extra events to make Jesus and the disciples seem more significant.

Not only are mythological elements missing in the Gospel narratives, there are certain aspects that show that the story was being reported factually and has not been changed through the years. Many of these examples were documented in last week’s lesson. One additional, powerful example is the women who were reported as the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb. We already covered the significance of this fact, but its evidential value cannot be understated. Arguably the most influential Resurrection scholar in the world today says the women are “generally cited as the strongest argument”²⁴ for the empty tomb.

Fact #4: The Immediate Birth and Rapid Growth of Christianity

Most systems of belief develop over a long period of time through discussion and gradual change. Christianity, however, literally sprang into existence and radically differed from the major systems of thought in the 1st century. This phenomenon must be explained regardless of one’s acceptance of Jesus’ resurrection. Following his 800 page survey of this topic, N. T. Wright concludes, “the rise of early Christianity cannot be explained except on the basis upon which the early Christians themselves insist, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, following his shameful execution, was raised bodily from the dead.”²⁵

In Jewish thought, the term ‘resurrection,’ carried 2 important implications: (1) all saints would be resurrected (2) at the end of the world.²⁶ Any claim of ‘resurrection’ that did not involve both elements would be laughed at, for such an alternative definition was simply not taught by

²³ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 154-55.

²⁴ Ergun Caner and Ed Hindson, eds., *Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 2008), 136.

²⁵ N. T. Wright, “Early Traditions and the Origins of Christianity”, http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Early_Traditions.htm, April 17, 2013.

²⁶ Charles Dunn, “The Reality of the Resurrection: Historical Evidences for the Resurrection of Jesus”, <http://www.dartmouthapologia.org/articles/show/110>, July 8, 2013.

Judaism. Perhaps an upstart religion would be open to changing their theology frequently, but the Jews have one of the most theologically and culturally rich heritages known to mankind. Further, the Jewish conception of Messiah was a conquering ruler, not one gruesomely murdered by the political and military leaders of the day.²⁷ For this reason, the Jews would have been highly unlikely to see Jesus as Messiah following his death because he was exactly the opposite of what was expected of Messiah. Yet, despite the weight of evidence and expectation from Judaism, over 10,000 Jews had converted to Christianity within 5 weeks of Jesus' death!²⁸

What does this mean? It means exactly what N. T. Wright said – the rise of Christianity cannot be accounted for outside the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He later wrote, “most Jews of this period hoped for resurrection, many Jews of this period hoped for a Messiah, but nobody put those two hopes together until the early Christians did so”.²⁹

While Jews saw individual bodily resurrection as impossible, the Greco-Romans would have seen it as completely undesirable, even if it was possible by some strange chance. In the pagan mindset, the physical world was evil and escaping it through death was seen as one of the highest goods possible. Additionally, the spiritual realm was believed to be good. Because of this, a ‘Messiah’ who departed the good spiritual world to re-enter the evil physical world would have been scorned in the Greco-Roman mindset.³⁰ While there were an abundance of beliefs concerning the reality and nature of an afterlife, Wright properly notes, “A great many things supposedly happened to the dead, but resurrection did not.”³¹

Had a small quantity of Jesus' followers bucked the belief system of their day, it may be possible to dismiss them as outliers. However, the immediate force generated by Christianity cannot be dismissed by one seeking to truly determine the truth concerning Jesus' death and resurrection. While most systems of thought take decades to develop, over 10,000 Jews were worshipping Jesus as God within 5 weeks of his crucifixion. This explosion was not limited to Jews – the Christian faith rapidly spread across the Roman Empire, reaching the Imperial Palace in less than 20 years and eventually overtaking the entire empire.³² Based on the immediate growth of Christianity, enormous number of adherents, vast scope of influence, and commitment of initial eyewitnesses to their story, it becomes apparent that simply dismissing the resurrection narratives as fanciful thinking is not a viable option.

Interpreting the Data

Whatever someone believes about Jesus and miracles at large, the data demands an explanation. Simply stated, the evidence for Jesus presents a major historical problem for those who deny His resurrection. Tim Keller comments on the problem faced by skeptics, “It is not enough to simply believe Jesus did not rise from the dead.”³³ You must present a viable historical explanation for the established data. What explanation can be given for these accounts? The post mortem

²⁷ Tracey R. Rich, “Mashiach: The Messiah”, <http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm> April 17, 2013.

²⁸ Charles Dunn, “The Reality of the Resurrection: Historical Evidences for the Resurrection of Jesus.

²⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 205.

³⁰ Charles Dunn, “The Reality of the Resurrection: Historical Evidences for the Resurrection of Jesus.

³¹ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 83.

³² Charles Dunn, “The Reality of the Resurrection: Historical Evidences for the Resurrection of Jesus.

³³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 202.

appearances have been challenged a great deal, and 3 primary options exist for interpreting the data. (1) they really saw the risen Jesus, (2) they were liars and made it up, or (3) they had hallucinations of the risen Jesus.

The Liar Hypothesis

The liar hypothesis is faced with some serious difficulties. First, not only is there no historical evidence to support this view, the best evidence from the ancient world says Jesus really rose from the dead! Recall that each of the facts listed is accepted by an overwhelming majority of scholars, regardless of their worldview commitments. Second, the liar hypothesis is incredibly improbable because the witnesses had nothing to gain from lying. Jesus had destroyed his disciples' idea of a political and military kingdom. Their false ideas about the Kingdom of God had been replaced with commands to lead a life of poverty, servanthood, and constant threat of persecution. The liar hypothesis also does not account for the conversion of James and Paul, who had previously opposed Jesus. Paul in particular was a powerful religious leader who would have a great deal to gain from *opposing* Jesus. So, not only did Paul have nothing to gain by proclaiming Jesus' resurrection, he actually had a lot to gain by NOT proclaiming Jesus' resurrection.

Additionally, the martyrdom of the earliest witnesses demonstrates that they had no intent to deceive in order to gain power, prestige or any other type of material gain. Blaise Pascal succinctly evaluated the significance of this fact, "I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut."³⁴ The argument is not that martyrs make a given belief true – that would make countless other religions true in addition to Christianity. Rather, the argument is that eyewitnesses simply would not willingly and joyfully go to a gruesome death for what they knew to be a lie. When they said they saw Jesus, they were telling the truth! Recall the statement from last week's lesson from a Harvard historian stating, "people do not make up lies in order to hurt themselves; they lie to help themselves." Some might choose to believe the liar hypothesis, but this belief is not held because of evidence that supports it.

The Hallucination Hypothesis

Some might respond that those who saw Jesus were actually telling the truth, but they did not see Him in reality, but rather as part of a hallucination. This hypothesis is fraught with problems, but we will start with its strengths. First, the hallucination hypothesis accounts for the death of Jesus by crucifixion. Second, it grants that each of the people mentioned in I Corinthians 15 really did have encounters with Jesus after his death, although this hypothesis says the encounters were not with the risen Jesus.

As for the weaknesses, a brief description of hallucinations is helpful. Hallucinations are private, mental occurrences that are often connected to events that the person desires to be true. The hallucination hypothesis offers no explanation for why Paul would have converted from a hater of Christians to the most zealous Christian missionary of the century and perhaps the greatest missionary ever. Following the death of the supposed Messiah, Paul would not have expected Jesus to rise from the dead, much less mourned his death! The same argument applies to James

³⁴ Keller, 210.

the brother of Jesus. These cases must be explained for an opposing view to be taken seriously, yet the hallucination hypothesis offers no plausible explanation.

Second, the groups of people Jesus appeared to make the hallucination hypothesis incredibly unlikely. Recall that hallucinations are private experiences in one's mind. The term, "group hallucination" is simply an oxymoron – such a thing does not exist. Thus, Jesus' appearances to the twelve disciples, more than 500 brothers, and all the apostles make the odds of a hallucination literally astronomical and statistically impossible. The notion that three independent groups hallucinated the exact same thing on three separate occasions and in three separate places is simply absurd. Gary Habermas and Mike Licona comment,

“today we know that hallucinations are private occurrences, which occur in the mind of an individual. They are not collective experiences ... Hallucinations are like dreams in this way. Imagine that it is the middle of the night. You wake up your wife and say, “Honey, I just had a dream that we were in Hawaii. Come back to sleep and join me in my dream we'll enjoy a free vacation together.” It would be impossible for her to do so, since a dream exists only in the mind of the individual. It cannot be shared with another person. Likewise, a hallucination cannot be shared.”³⁵

Third, the hallucination hypothesis cannot account for the empty tomb. Even if, contrary to all medical knowledge, a group hallucination was possible for three separate groups, in three separate places, at three separate times, the body of Jesus would still be in the tomb. Roman and Jewish authorities would simply need to produce the body to dispel any religious uprisings.

Fourth, and possibly most significantly, the hallucination hypothesis does not have any data to support it from the 1st century. The first three arguments discussed all show why the hallucination hypothesis is false. So, not only do we have no good reasons to believe this hypothesis is true, we have exceptionally good reasons to believe it is false. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says that the hallucination hypothesis is “based on nothing more than elaborate guesswork.”³⁶ The fact that this theory is one of the more common naturalistic theories shows just how far people are willing to go in order to reject the truth of Christianity.

The Resurrection Hypothesis

When these four facts are combined, which are accepted by an overwhelming majority of scholars from all religions and worldviews, a compelling case is made for the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Simply stated, the resurrection hypothesis is the only interpretation that explain all of the established facts. Above all, this means that Christianity is true! If God raised Jesus from the dead, then it becomes completely reasonable to accept the countless other miracle claims by faith. The resurrection of Jesus provides us with good reasons for believing the miracles reported in the Gospels actually took places just as the authors say they did. While not all miracle claims possess staggering evidence in their favor, it is through God's sovereign preservation that we have such overwhelming evidence for literally the most important event in all history.

³⁵ Habermas and Licona, 106.

³⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 19.

If Jesus did rise from the dead, then Christianity is true, for in that miracle, all of Jesus' claims about Himself are validated and His pending judgment on sin is vindicated. The hope of Christianity rests on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter wrote, "he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."³⁷ The doctrines surrounding the resurrection give hope in the midst of the most pressing trials of life because death and suffering are ultimately defeated enemies.

The Main Thing Must Be The Main Thing!

As Christians, we have a responsibility to daily examine the Scriptures to learn truth. Paul commended the Berean church because they "received the Word with eagerness; examining the Scriptures daily."³⁸ While we examine the intricacies and nuances of Scripture, we must not lose sight of the most important aspect of Christianity – Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This is not to say that we should not develop a thoroughly Biblical view of the origin of the earth or appropriate form of government. Rather, we simply should remember that the resurrection of Jesus is most important. Recall the words of Paul in I Corinthians 15,

"And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."

Consider some of Pastor Curt's final words to our church, "You ask me why I am a Christian? Because of Jesus Christ who rose from the dead!"³⁹

As we preach the Gospel to ourselves every single day, let us not forget to keep the main thing, the main thing. As we share the gospel with our spouse, children, and extended family, let us not forget to keep the main thing, the main thing. As we show the gospel to our neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances, let us not forget to keep the main thing, the main thing. Jaroslav Pelikan was right when he said, "If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen –nothing else matters."⁴⁰ If Christ is alive, then nothing in this world compares to serving Him. If Christ is alive, we can gladly dismiss everything this world has to offer for the all-surpassing joy of serving our Maker in unbelievable intimacy. If, however, Christ is not alive, then life has no meaning, and we can do whatever we want with our life. In short, the resurrection of Jesus determines who rightly owns us. If Christ is not alive, we are justified in saying, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."⁴¹ If Christ is alive, we are compelled to say,

*"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*⁴²

³⁷ I Peter 1:3

³⁸ Acts 17:11

³⁹ Pastor Curt DeGraaff, *The Results of Revival*, (Sermon at Bethesda Baptist Church; Brownsburg, IN) August 17, 2014.

⁴⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Yale Department of History Newsletter*, Spring (2007), 3.

⁴¹ William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*.

⁴² Galatians 2:20.

All praise be to God, who has bought us with His blood, may we joyfully serve Him all of our days!

Verse for Scripture Memory

I Corinthians 15:14, 17

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important?
2. Why is I Corinthians 15 such an important passage in defending the resurrection of Jesus?
3. What are the significant factors concerning the appearances of Jesus after his death?
4. Why was the birth of Christianity so unexpected? How does it argue for the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event?
5. How does pondering the resurrection of Jesus impact the way you approach life each day?

Recommended Reading

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus
By Gary Habermas and Michael Licona

If you are looking for a defense of the resurrection, written at the popular level, this is the best book on the market. Others are written at a scholarly level and can be tough to read, but this presents information that is easy to understand and gives very helpful tips in how to use the information as you share your faith. Additionally, this book comes with a CD-ROM computer game that is a pseudo-Jeopardy program. All questions are directly from the book and it serves as a fantastic tool to help you actually learn the material. This would be a great book to read as you prepare yourself to “make a defense for the hope that is in you” – it would also be a nice Christmas gift for a brother or sister who is seeking to engage their mind in their spiritual walk.

The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach
By Michael R. Licona

The Resurrection of the Son of God
By N. T. Wright

Both of these books are epic, in-depth defenses of the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection. They will take you a while to read – both are in the neighborhood of 800 pages. That said, if you really want to go as deep as possible on this topic, these are the best and most advanced resources available. Licona’s book deals with the historical method and its application to the resurrection of Jesus. Wright’s book analyzes the 1st century culture of Jews and Greeks. His conclusion is that the only way Christianity could have started so rapidly and re-defined the term,

“resurrection” was if Jesus really rose from the dead. I enjoyed both works, but they are written exhaustively, and the problem with exhaustive writing is that it often leaves the reader exhausted!