

Non-Negotiable: The Resurrection

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The Christian religion is based upon the reality of the resurrection. Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote:

And if Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is future, and you are still in your sins (1 Corinthians 15:14-16).

If Christ was not raised, then we will not be raised. If Christ has not been raised, Christianity is not true.

Since the resurrection is central to Christianity, then proving the resurrection is one of the

most important studies we could conduct. If the resurrection of Jesus did not actually occur, then we don't need to bother with Christianity. If Jesus was truly raised from the dead, then He is Lord of Lords, King of Kings, the Son of God, and the Judge of all. Therefore, if Jesus really was raised from the dead, then I must be a Christian. There is no middle ground on this matter. There is nothing more important for my life than to run to Jesus, the resurrected Savior.

I believe the evidence points to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ the resurrected Son of God. Because every Christian deals with doubt from time to time, I hope this study will lead you toward a stronger faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Many contemporary historians and theologians believe that the resurrection of Jesus is just not a matter of historical study. However, if the resurrection occurred in history, then it is the most important and significant event to ever occur in history and worthy of investigation. And if it actually *did* occur, then surely there is historical evidence of this event.

The evidence for the resurrection can be seen in the early Christians' consistent belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection. The best hypothesis for such a large group of people believing in the resurrection of a crucified man is that it happened. The discovery of the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus must be explained in some way, and the best hypothesis is that they really occurred.

At any time, the tomb of Jesus could have been examined. Surely it was. It is silly to think that the first believers did not visit the tomb and look for Jesus' body. If they knew the body was hidden or if they knew Jesus lived out His remaining life somewhere, then they would not have sacrificed their lives for the lie of the resurrection. Non-believers would have been able to silence the growing Christian movement by presenting the body of Jesus. This would have done away with Christianity, but this never happened. Why? *Because the resurrection is real.*

If the resurrection was not real—or even if it could be easily discredited—then the early Christians would have downplayed this doctrine. Instead, it was the *core doctrine* of the church from the earliest times (1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Acts 2:14-36, 13:28-31; Mark 15:37-16:7; Matthew 28). Why would these early Christians make something so unbelievable the core of their movement? The doctrine of the resurrection was the foundation of their faith because it really happened, and no one could disprove it.¹

Furthermore, the existence of the church today demands a reasonable explanation. The earliest Christians surely would not have given their lives for a lie. Would *you*? The opportunity to disprove Christianity was great—all that was required was the dead body of Jesus. But Christianity continued. In fact, it multiplied. The original preachers of the Christian religion gave their lives in defense of the resurrection. Looking execution square in the eyes, it would have been easy to recant. But they left their comfortable jobs, prestigious positions, and the warmth of their families' love because they believed Jesus really did die and really was raised on the third day.

THE GOSPEL WRITERS' EVIDENCE

All four Gospel writers find the culmination of the works in the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20-21). The apostolic affirmation of the resurrection is undeniable. These men believed that Jesus was raised from the dead and gave their lives (many gave up good careers) to proclaim of this reality.

The New Testament and Old Testament are inspired of God (2 Timothy 3:16). We can believe every word which has been written for us. However, if we were to treat the Gospel writers' record just as a historical document, then we would still notice several things which point to the accuracy of the records.

The Bible writers have a reputation for accuracy. Many non-believers have become believers as they set out to disprove the Bible. The lack of mistakes in the Scriptures has led to faith in many. The Gospel writers' accuracy in the record shows that they told what *actually* happened. The Gospel writers often present themselves in embarrassing situations: they denied Jesus; they ran from Jesus when they were needed the most.

The Gospels record that the first witnesses of the resurrection and the first to tell the great story were women (Mark 16:1-8). In the ancient world, the testimony of women was not admissible in court. But the New Testament records that the first to see and to tell the story were women. If this were not true, it would not have been recorded. Given the historical setting, it is rather shocking that the women's testimony is recorded at all. But since this is the way it really happened, this is the way it was recorded. The Bible wants us to know what really happened (Luke 1:1-4). Therefore, we can have confidence that the resurrection really happened.

Saul is a great example of one who was converted by the evidence of the resurrection. He began as the chief persecutor of the earliest Christians, but then he saw the evidence of the resurrection and everything changed. He went from being the chief persecutor of the

church to one of the main preachers and theologians of the church. He is the most prolific writer of the New Testament. In Acts 9, Luke seems to purposefully begin Saul's conversion story with his persecution (9:1-4) only to provide the bookend of his being persecuted for his faith in the resurrected Jesus (9:23-25).

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S PROPHETIC EVIDENCE

Jesus prophesied that He would be killed and raised on the third day (Matthew 16:21; John 2:19-22). These prophecies would have been impossible for Him to fake. But there are also prophecies of Jesus' resurrection in the Old Testament. When was the last time you studied the messianic prophecies? While this is a neglected area of study today, it was central to much of the preaching in the days and years after the resurrection.

Jesus interpreted the Old Testament through the lens of Himself. In Luke 24:44-49, Jesus taught us how to read and interpret the Old Testament. Jesus said, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead'" (Luke 24:44-46). With this hermeneutical² framework which was taught by Jesus, Peter and the other disciples preached Jesus from the Old Testament.

In the first Gospel sermon, we find an exposition of Joel 2:28-32; Psalm 16:8-11; and Psalm 110:1. Joel's prophecy referred to the reign of the Messiah. This reign began with Jesus' resurrection. So the promises recorded in Joel 2 were only able to begin after Jesus had been raised. Therefore, Peter had to prove Jesus' resurrection in order to prove the promises of Joel 2 were in effect. In order to do this, Peter first listed what the assembly already knew: (a) Jesus was attested by God by miracles (Acts 2:22), (b) Jesus was crucified (Acts 2:23), and (c) Jesus had been raised (Acts 2:24).

But Peter said it was not possible for Jesus "to be held" by death (Acts 2:24). This was not only due to God's plan but also because of the prophetic Scriptures which could not be broken (John 10:35). The first unbreakable prophecy in Scripture Peter listed was Psalm 16:8-11. This prophecy taught that Jesus was at the Lord's right hand (Psalm 16:8); Jesus "flesh dwells secure" (Psalm 16:9); Jesus would not be abandoned in Hades (Psalm 16:10a); Jesus flesh would not "see corruption" (Psalm 16:10b); and that there would be life after death enjoyed at the right and of God (Psalm 16:11).

David also foresaw the resurrection of Jesus in Psalm 110. In that psalm we see the eternal equality of Jesus and the Father (Psalm 110:1); the Father's promise to the Son (Psalm

110:1b); the people who freely offer themselves to Jesus after the resurrection (Psalm 110:3); the High Priestly service of Jesus as the resurrected Priest King (Psalm 110:4); and the judgment which will fall on those who reject Him (Psalm 110:5-7). From Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 16:8-11, Peter taught that Jesus is eternally equal with the Father and that after going to Hades, He would be raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father.

CONCLUSION

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26). Jesus was raised and Jesus is the resurrection. He is the resurrection because He is life. But our resurrection hinges upon our belief. Do we trust Him? Do we believe Him?

Hopefully, we can say, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:27). If we reject Him, we reject life and the resurrection. If we accept Him, we gain life and resurrection. His resurrection and our confidence in our future resurrection then shapes our lives. We live every moment in light of the resurrection. We are joyful because we live and will live. We are reverent because we will appear before Him. We are holy because we know we will be in the presence of the holy God.

Footnotes

1. For further research and detailed information, see William Lane Craig’s chapter “The Resurrection” in his book *Reasonable Faith Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Also, the most detailed study and most significant work on this subject, in my opinion, is N.T. Wright’s *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. A more popular level work would be *Evidence for the Resurrection*, by Joahs and Sean McDowell.
2. Hermeneutics refers to the presuppositions which we bring to the interpreting (exegesis) of the text. Jesus taught that the Bible should be interpreted Christologically. That means that we should look for Jesus in the Text. We should always ask, what does this teach me about Jesus.