

The Question of the Resurrection of Jesus*David Frees**Experience: Director of online learning at
Our Daily Bread University*

The resurrection of Jesus was either the greatest hoax or the most important incident in human history. The events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are found in all four gospels of the New Testament. Of the four, Luke and Matthew's accounts are the longest in length with Mark and John's descriptions being the shortest.

When combined, the four accounts provide a timeline of events that occurred toward the end of the week following Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. According to this timeline, Jesus gathered His disciples to celebrate Passover, after which He led them to a garden where He prayed and was later arrested by Roman soldiers who'd been led there by Judas. In response, the disciples fled as Jesus was brought before Caiaphas the high priest and then Pilate the Roman governor of the area. Following several accusations from the religious leaders, Pilate, knowing Jesus was innocent, offered to release Him, a customary act during the celebration of Passover. The people instead called for the crucifixion of Jesus and the release of Barabbas, a known criminal and murderer.

To satisfy the crowd, Pilate handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers where He was scourged and mocked before being led to be crucified. While on the cross, the soldiers gambled for Jesus' clothing as the religious leaders and those watching taunted Him asking that He save Himself by miraculously coming down from the cross, if in fact He was the true Messiah. After His death, Joseph of Arimathea met with Pilate and requested Jesus' body, which he placed in an unused tomb. A stone was rolled in front of the entrance of the tomb and, at the request of the religious leaders, Roman guards were stationed outside to keep the disciples from stealing the body. On the first day of the week some of Jesus' followers came to the tomb and, finding it empty, proclaimed that He had indeed risen from the dead.

In addition to the above events, each of the gospel accounts

provide additional information about Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Unique to Matthew's account is the fact that Pilate washed his hands symbolically before the people as a sign that Jesus' death would not be on him. To this the crowd responded, "His blood be on us and our children!" Both Matthew and Mark mention that during Jesus' appearance before Caiaphas, while many witnesses testified various things against Him, two came forward accusing Him of saying He could tear down the temple of God and rebuild it in three days. Mark, however, adds that the statements of these two witnesses were not in agreement making their testimony invalid according to Deuteronomy 19:15. Mark also adds that when Joseph of Arimathea asked for Jesus' body, Pilate inquired of a Roman centurion as to whether Jesus was in fact dead, to which the centurion affirmed that He was.

In Luke's account we learn that during Jesus' time before Pilate, He was sent to Herod, who was king of Galilee, the region Jesus was originally from. This may have been Pilate's way of averting responsibility for the situation that was forming among the people. Herod, however, sent Jesus back to Pilate finding no fault in Him. We also learn from Luke that while the onlookers and both robbers crucified with Jesus reviled Him, one of the robbers eventually turned to Jesus and asked for forgiveness.

In John's account we discover that before being brought before Caiaphas the high priest, Jesus was led to the house of Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas and formerly served as high priest. John also records that Jesus entrusted the care of His mother, Mary, to John the apostle while He was on the cross. We further learn that because a Sabbath was about to begin, the religious leaders requested that the legs of the criminals be broken in order to bring about their quick death. However, when the Roman soldier came to Jesus, He was already dead, so a spear was thrust into His side instead. Finally, John records that when Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus, Nicodemus, who met with Jesus in John 3, was with him.

When compared to the Old Testament Scriptures, we discover that several of the events mentioned in the timeline were the fulfillment of prophecy. Among these are that Jesus would be betrayed by someone close to Him (Psalm 41:9) for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12); that He would not open His mouth but be led like a lamb to slaughter (Isaiah 53:7); that those around Him would mock and hurl insults at Him (Psalm 22:7-8); that His garments would be gambled for (Psalm 22:17-18); that not

a bone in His body would be broken (Psalm 34:20); and that He would be raised from the dead according to Jesus' own teaching (Matthew 12:40).

Since the birth of the church, men and women have died for their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the one who conquered death and offers the promise of eternal life to those who follow Him. But did the resurrection really happen? Did Jesus conquer death? Did He come back to life three days after being crucified as the Bible claims? In the remainder of this lesson we will answer three primary questions about the resurrection of Jesus: (1) Did Jesus die on the cross? (2) Did Jesus rise from the dead? and (3) Why is the resurrection of Jesus important?

Did Jesus Die on the Cross?

The importance of this question comes from the fact that you cannot have a resurrection unless you have an actual death. To this end, some have denied the reality of the resurrection because they do not believe Jesus actually died on the cross. This is a view commonly known as the apparent death or swoon theory. The theory originated with H. E. G. Paulus around 1828 and asserts that Jesus did not die while on the cross but merely passed out, fainted, or fell unconscious. Once in the tomb, Jesus regained consciousness, moved the large stone covering the doorway, and convinced His followers that He had been resurrected. This theory suggests that Jesus' unconsciousness not only fooled the onlookers at His crucifixion but the Roman soldiers who took Him down from the cross. It is a theory that fails to take seriously the injuries Jesus sustained from His crucifixion and makes Jesus a deceiver. In addition, it would be difficult for Jesus, who was battered and beaten beyond recognition, to convince His followers that He had indeed victoriously conquered death.

Contrary to the apparent death theory, execution by crucifixion was designed to be cruel, painful, humiliating, and result in the death of its victim. The assurance that Jesus did in fact die while on the cross is supported by three primary arguments.

First, the Romans soldiers who crucified Jesus were very skilled in the process of crucifixion and its goal to slowly, but effectively, kill an individual. The act of crucifixion was designed to keep an individual alive and in as much pain as possible for as long as desired without allowing death to occur. Typically, though

depending on the manner of crucifixion used, to more quickly bring about death the legs of the individual on the cross would be broken resulting in asphyxiation. This was the case with the criminals who were crucified on each side of Jesus. When the soldier came to Jesus, however, he recognized that Jesus was already dead so, instead of breaking His legs, a spear was thrust in His side. And if Jesus wasn't dead before, He would have been from the wound inflicted by the spear.

Second, Mark records that when Joseph of Arimathea requested Jesus' body, Pilate inquired of a centurion as to whether Jesus was in fact dead. The centurion, who had seen many people die on a cross and would have been more than able to determine if Jesus was truly dead or not, answered in the affirmative. It should also be noted that both the centurion and Pilate had no reason to lie about Jesus' death. Pilate was responsible for ordering His death, and the centurion was responsible for carrying out the order, an order that if not fulfilled would have resulted in the centurion's own punishment.

Third, when Joseph of Arimathea placed the body in the tomb, he sealed it with a stone that was rolled in front of the doorway. Round stones used to seal tombs at this time were typically four and a half feet tall and weighed between one and two tons. A stone of this size and weight would have been impossible to move from inside the tomb. Joseph placed the stone over the tomb because there was no indication that Jesus was alive, and he had no understanding that a resurrection would occur two days later, as we will see below. Additionally, Joseph was part of the Jewish council that voted to have Jesus killed and, having handled the body himself, he would have known whether Jesus was dead or just unconscious.

While some continue to deny Jesus' death on the cross, it is a historical point that is rarely argued today among scholars who study in this area. From what is known medically of crucifixion, the Roman soldiers' proficiency at it, and the testimony of eyewitnesses, it is widely believed that Jesus did in fact die while on the cross. With this in mind, we now turn to our second question.

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

The answer to the question of whether Jesus rose from the dead

determines the validity of the Christian faith. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then as the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, our faith is useless and we are still in our sins and have no hope of eternal life. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then the good news of the gospel is true: Jesus has defeated death and we, as His followers, share in the hope of the resurrection from the dead. However, as with the question of whether Jesus actually died on the cross, objections to His resurrection have also been raised. The more common of these objections include the conspiracy theory, the wrong tomb theory, and the legend theory.

The conspiracy theory holds that the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb and later claimed He had risen from the dead. This theory was first refuted by Eusebius of Caesarea around AD 263 and later by William Paley and others when it was resurrected by deists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Various arguments have been used to debunk this theory. First, it would have been impossible for the disciples to take Jesus' body given the presence of the guards stationed outside the tomb. Second, the fact that the disciples would propose such a deceitful ruse, claiming Jesus rose from the dead when they knew it to be false, is inconsistent with those who had followed the teachings of Jesus for three years. Third, a deception of this sort would only result in the disciples' own suffering and very possible death. Stated another way, while people may be willing to suffer and die for a cause they believe to be true, people are not willing to suffer and die for a cause they know to be false. In order for the disciples to endure the persecution they would experience as followers of the risen Christ, they would have had to have been convinced that the resurrection actually took place. Therefore, if the resurrection was known by them to have been false, at least one of the disciples would have revealed the deceitful scheme instead of dying for something they knew to be a lie.

In *The Son Rises*, William Lane Craig stipulates that the many arguments laid out by Paley and his predecessors have refuted the conspiracy theory forever. Craig writes, "It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that no modern biblical scholar would for a moment entertain the theory that the disciples conspired together to steal the corpse and then lie about the resurrection appearances. It is utterly out of the question. The fact that this issue is still batted back and forth at the popular level is a sad testimony to the terrible lack of communication between the specialist and the man on the street."

A second theory that has been raised against the resurrection is the wrong tomb theory that originated with Kirsopp Lake in 1907. This theory holds that on the first day of the week when the women went to anoint the body of Jesus, they inadvertently went to the wrong tomb, which they saw to be empty, and therefore proclaimed that Jesus had risen. This theory is easily refuted not only by the fact that the women knew exactly where Jesus had been buried as mentioned in Luke 23:55, but by the simple fact that when the disciples began to proclaim the resurrection it would have been all too easy for the religious leaders to simply identify the correct tomb, open it, and produce the body of Jesus.

A third theory commonly used to challenge the resurrection is the legend theory espoused by David Strauss proposing that the resurrection of Jesus is merely a legend invented by His followers in the early days after His death, which grew with each successive generation. This particular theory denies the reliability of the gospel accounts themselves and views the resurrection as a myth. Modern biblical scholarship, however, has demonstrated that the gospel accounts are authentic, accurate, and should be considered biographical in nature.

In his book *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, Craig Blomberg writes, “Although the novel and avant-garde almost by definition are what receive the most attention in the media and interest on the Internet, the amount of solid scholarship that has been produced in the last forty-five years internationally that supports the historical trustworthiness of this or that portion of the Bible has grown exponentially.” As discussed in lesson 3, the Bible is a unique book whose historical reliability is supported by its stellar textual transmission, archaeological discoveries, and many prophetic fulfillments.

Drawing from the evidence presented above, there are five foundational lines of argumentation that can be given to support the authenticity of the resurrection. First, the moral character of the disciples. The disciples followed Jesus for three years, and the moral character they would have developed would be inconsistent with the idea of them creating or supporting a lie designed to deceive others. In addition, the disciples themselves were surprised by the resurrection given that belief in a resurrected Messiah was foreign to Jewish thought. In fact, there are no direct prophecies in the Old Testament regarding the resurrection.

Second, the reality of the empty tomb. The tomb was discovered

by women who were going to anoint the body of Jesus on the first day of the week. Upon arriving, they were told that Jesus had risen and were to go tell the disciples. At this time the testimony of women was considered unreliable, which is demonstrated in Peter's disbelief of Mary Magdalene's report in Mark 16:11. If the empty tomb was merely an invention of the early church, then the story would have had the disciples discovering the empty tomb rather than women.

Third, the many eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, Paul recites a creedal statement that can be dated back to just a few years after the resurrection event itself. The creedal statement records four facts that were believed by the first followers of Christ: Christ died for our sins; Christ was buried; Christ was raised on the third day; and Christ appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and later to over five hundred people at one time who were still alive at Paul's writing. It was a statement of faith developed very early in the Christian community which, if false, would have been refuted by those who knew the truth.

Fourth, the willingness of those who saw the risen Christ to suffer and die for something they knew to be true. The disciples would face severe persecution and eventual death because of their belief in the resurrected Jesus. As mentioned above, while people will die for what they believe to be true, they won't die for what they know to be false. The resurrection appearances of Jesus to His followers had a profound effect on their lives, which empowered them to live and proclaim His resurrection in the face of overwhelming odds.

Fifth, the accuracy of the gospel accounts. The gospels should be viewed as authentic, eyewitness accounts because they were understood to be authoritative in the first century and referred to as "Scripture" by such early writers as Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. Reverence for these documents and their incorporation in early church writings led to them being collected into a single volume at a very early date. The gospels, Acts, and the writings of Paul were even accepted by non-Christian groups as historical records, though they may not have been embraced and followed.

Gary Habermas, a New Testament scholar, takes an even simpler approach to understanding the resurrection of Jesus as an historic event in which he assumes one of three approaches to the Bible. First, if the Bible is the inspired Word of God, as was demonstrated in lesson 3, then Jesus was in fact raised from the dead as the

Bible claims. Second, if the Bible is not inspired but nonetheless a historically reliable document, then Jesus' resurrection from the dead is still factual. Third, if the Bible is neither inspired nor reliable but is just a book of ancient literature on the level of Homer and Plato, then one could still say Jesus was raised from the dead based on the testimonies of others during its time.

Why Is the Resurrection of Jesus Important?

The resurrection is essential to the Christian faith because without it the gospel is incomplete. According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus is a package deal; you cannot have one without the other. In 1 Corinthians 15:13–17 Paul writes, “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 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 futile and you are still in your sins*” (emphasis added). Without the resurrection we benefit nothing, but with the resurrection we not only gain forgiveness but the hope of eternal life.

The reality of Jesus' resurrection stands as the bedrock of the Christian faith and message; a message that has continued to spread across the globe for the past two thousand years. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world and proved His authority by conquering death through the resurrection. In John 10:17–18 Jesus said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” The resurrection of Jesus is important because without it we have no hope of escaping the fallen state we find ourselves in.

Conclusion

Those who doubt the reality of the resurrection do so not because of a lack of evidence but because of its implications. If God has revealed Himself in Jesus, who offered His life as a sacrifice for our sins, then it is only through that act of sacrifice that we can be redeemed. Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth,

and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” As such, Jesus is the only hope of salvation for humanity.

Some deny this truth, wanting instead to live life as they want and not be accountable to a higher power of any kind. Others deny the resurrection from what they feel is a more scientific perspective saying, “I don’t believe in the resurrection because people simply don’t rise from the dead.” This objection is an assumption based on a naturalistic worldview that presupposes miracles don’t happen. Science, however, is based on evidence, and if the evidence points to the reality of the resurrection, then it is possible even if it is unexplainable.

Still others may be angry at God due to a tragic experience in their lives. These people are called emotional doubters and hold God responsible for an unfortunate event and refuse to turn to Him for hope. This particular approach to God raises the question, “If God is good and all powerful, then why do bad things happen in life?” This is a question we will address in a future lesson.

Thus far in our study we have examined the biblical basis for engaging in Christian apologetics, evidence for the existence of God, reasons why we can view the Bible as a reliable historical document, and several proofs that the resurrection of Jesus actually occurred. In the next lesson we will examine the question of hypocrisy in the church as a means some use for rejecting the Christian faith.