



The Resurrection of Jesus

DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?

HERODOTUS, a Greek historian who lived 2,500 years ago, told a story about the Egyptians of his day. “At rich men’s banquets,” he wrote, “after dinner a man carries round a wooden image of a corpse in a coffin, painted and carved in exact imitation, a cubit or two cubits long. This he shows to each of the company, saying ‘Drink and make merry, but look on this; for such shalt thou be when thou art dead.’”

That attitude toward life and death was not unique to the Egyptians. Today, the expression “Eat, drink, and be merry” has become a cliché. If life ends at death, why not live it up? Why aspire to lofty values? If death ends it all, living for the present makes perfect sense. The apostle Paul said as much. He described the attitude of people who do not believe in the resurrection, saying: “If the dead are not to be raised up, let us eat and

drink, for tomorrow we are to die.”—1 Corinthians 15:32.

Of course, Paul himself did not believe that death meant an eternity of oblivion. He was convinced that the dead could live again, with the prospect of never dying at all. That conviction was founded on an event of immense importance, the truthfulness of which he considered to be unassailable—the resurrection* of Christ Jesus. That resurrection, in fact, was the greatest single event that strengthened the faith of the early disciples.

What meaning, though, does the resurrection of Jesus hold for us? How do we even know it really happened? Let us see how Paul reasoned

* In the Bible, the Greek word translated “resurrection” literally means “a standing up again.” It implies that a person is restored to life, retaining his or her unique identity, personality, and memories.

“He appeared to upward of five hundred brothers at one time . . .
After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; but last of all
he appeared also to me.”—1 Corinthians 15:6-8

on these matters when he wrote to the Christians living in Corinth.

WHAT IF CHRIST HAD NOT BEEN RAISED?

Some Christians in ancient Corinth were confused about the matter, and others did not believe in the literal resurrection at all. In his first letter to the Christians there, the apostle listed the consequences if the resurrection were not a reality. He wrote: “If, indeed, there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised up. But if Christ has not been raised up, our preaching is certainly in vain, and our faith is in vain. Moreover, we are also found false witnesses of God . . . Your faith is useless; you are yet in your sins. . . . Also, those who fell asleep in death in union with Christ perished.”—1 Corinthians 15:13-18.

Paul opened with a statement that can hardly be disputed: If the dead are not to be raised, then Christ, who died, could not have been raised to life. Supposing that Christ had not been raised, what would follow? Then, preaching the good news would be in vain, a colossal hoax. After all, the resurrection of Christ was a key element of the Christian faith, being inseparably linked to some of the Bible’s most basic teachings about God’s sovereignty, his name, his Kingdom, and our salvation. If the resurrection had not occurred, the message that Paul and the other apostles proclaimed would have consisted of nothing but empty, worthless words.

Other consequences would follow. If Christ had not been raised from the dead, Christian faith would be in vain, empty, based on a lie. Further, Paul and the others would have spoken falsely not only about the resurrection of Jesus

but also about the one whom they said resurrected him, Jehovah God. What is more, the assertion that Christ had “died for our sins” would also be untrue—for if the Savior himself had not been saved from death, he could not save others. (1 Corinthians 15:3) That would mean that Christians who had died, in some cases as martyrs, had perished with a false hope that they would be resurrected.

Paul drew the conclusion: “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:19) Paul, like other Christians, had suffered loss, experienced persecution, endured hardship, and faced death because he believed in the resurrection and all that it entailed. How futile if the resurrection were nothing but a lie!

WHY YOU SHOULD BELIEVE

Paul did not believe any of those negative consequences to be true. He knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and he summarized the evidences for the Corinthians, namely, “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, yes, that he has been raised up the third day according to the Scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”* Then Paul adds: “After that he appeared to upward of five hundred brothers at one time, the most of whom remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep in death. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; but last of all he appeared also to me.”—1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

* “The twelve” is another way of saying “the apostles,” even though for a time after the death of Judas Iscariot, there were only 11. At one appearance, only 10 of them at most could have represented the 12, for Thomas was absent.—John 20:24.



Paul began with the confident statement that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was resurrected. What made Paul so sure of that? One reason was the testimony of many eyewitnesses. The resurrected Jesus appeared to individuals (including Paul himself), to small groups, and even to a crowd of 500, many of whom had no doubt been skeptical when they heard the news that Jesus had been resurrected! (Luke 24:1-11) Most of the eyewitnesses were still alive in Paul's day and could be consulted to confirm those appearances. (1 Corinthians 15:6) One or two witnesses might be easy to dismiss, but not the testimony of 500 or more eyewitnesses.

Notice, too, that Paul mentioned twice that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were "according to the Scriptures." Those events confirmed that prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures about the Messiah had come true, thus proving that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

Despite the testimony of the eyewitnesses and of the Scriptures, there were and still are those who doubt that Jesus was raised up. Some say that his body was stolen by his disciples who then claimed to be witnesses to the resurrection. However, the disciples had neither the power nor the influence to overcome the Roman guards who were stationed at the entrance of the tomb. Others claim that the resurrection appearances were mere illusions. Contradicting that theory is the fact that the appearances occurred to many people at different times. Also, is it reasonable to believe that an illusion would cook and serve fish, as the resurrected Jesus did at Galilee? (John 21:9-14) Would an illusion in the form of a man invite observers to touch him?—Luke 24:36-39.

Still others charge that the resurrection was a hoax concocted by the disciples. But what benefit would there be in doing that? Bearing witness to the resurrection exposed the disciples to ridicule, suffering, and death. Why would they risk so much to support a mere lie? Moreover, they first gave their testimony in Jerusalem, right under the eyes of their opposers, who were ready to seize upon any excuse to condemn them.

The resurrection was the very thing that gave the disciples the courage to bear testimony about their Lord in spite of even the most violent persecution. The fact of the resurrection became a cen-

tral part of Christian faith. The early Christians did not risk their lives merely to bear witness about a wise teacher who was murdered. They risked their lives to proclaim Jesus' resurrection because it proved that he was the Christ, the Son of God, a powerful, living person who both supported and guided them. His resurrection meant that they too would rise from the dead. Really, if Jesus had not been raised up, there would be no Christianity. If Jesus had not been resurrected, we might never have even heard of him.

What meaning, though, does the resurrection of Christ have for us today?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who will be resurrected?

"There is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous." (Acts 24:15) The righteous will include faithful men and women such as Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. The unrighteous will include those who failed to meet God's standards because of not having the opportunity to learn and follow them.

Where will the resurrected ones be?

Some will be resurrected to immortal spirit life in the heavens to rule with Christ as kings and priests over the earth. (Revelation 5:9, 10) Most, though, will be brought back to life on the earth. They will enjoy everlasting life in an earthly paradise.—Luke 23:39-43.

When will the resurrection take place?

At a time, yet future, after the wicked are removed from the earth. The Bible indicates a more extensive resurrection will occur during the thousand-year reign of Jesus, during which the earth will be transformed into a paradise.—Revelation 20:6.

Do the traditions of Easter have anything to do with the resurrection?

The customs of Easter involving bunnies, colored eggs, candles, and lilies were all adapted from pagan religions, as was the name Easter itself. None of these things have anything to do with the resurrection of Jesus, which Easter purports to represent. Does it matter? Yes. God's Word commands us to separate ourselves from false religion and to "worship the Father with spirit and truth."—John 4:23; 2 Corinthians 6:17.

If Jesus is God, as some churches teach, who resurrected Jesus?

Jesus is not God—whose name is Jehovah—but he is the Son of God. Jehovah resurrected Jesus from the dead. (Romans 10:9) One Bible scholar comments: "It is unthinkable that anyone—even Christ—could raise himself."*

* For further answers to these questions, see chapters 7 and 8 of the book *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* published by Jehovah's Witnesses, or log on to www.jw.org.



The Resurrection of Jesus Means Life!

JESUS' resurrection is not merely an isolated, ancient occurrence that has little meaning for us today. The apostle Paul pointed out its significance when he wrote: **"Christ has been raised up from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep in death. For since death is through a man, resurrection of the dead is also through a man. For just as in Adam all are dying, so also in the Christ all will be made alive."**—1 Corinthians 15:20-22.

Jesus was resurrected on Nisan 16, 33 C.E., the day of the year on which the Jews presented the firstfruits of the first grain crop before Jehovah God at the temple sanctuary in Jerusalem. By calling Jesus the firstfruits, Paul implied that there would be other individuals brought back from death.

Paul's next words explain what has been made possible by Jesus' resurrection. "Since death is through a man," said Paul, "resurrection of the dead is also through a man." Because of the sin and imperfection passed on to us from Adam,

we all die. However, by giving his perfect human life as a ransom, Jesus opened the way for mankind to be released from slavery to sin and death through the resurrection. Summing up the matter nicely, Paul wrote at Romans 6:23: "The wages sin pays is death, but the gift God gives is everlasting life by Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus himself explained the meaning that his death and resurrection have for us. Referring to himself, he said: "The Son of man must be lifted up, that everyone believing in him may have everlasting life. For God loved the world so much that he gave his only-begotten Son, in order that everyone exercising faith in him might not be destroyed but have everlasting life."—John 3:14-16.

Imagine—endless life without pain, suffering, or sorrow! (Revelation 21:3, 4) What a happy prospect! One scholar put the matter this way: "While graveyards may remind one of the brevity of life, the resurrection ensures the brevity of death." Yes, the resurrection of Jesus means life! ■



How did first-century Jews prepare the dead for burial?

The Jews buried their dead quickly after death, usually on the same day. There were two reasons for such prompt action. First, dead bodies decompose quickly in the hot climate of the Middle East. Second, according to the thinking of the time, leaving a body unburied for days showed dishonor to the deceased and his family.

The Gospels and the book of Acts record at least four burials that took place on the day of death. (Matthew 27:57-60; Acts 5: 5-10; 7:60-8:2) Centuries earlier, Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died while Jacob and his family were on a journey. Rather than bring her body back to their family burial place, Jacob buried her in a grave "on the way to . . . Bethlehem."—Genesis 35:19, 20, 27-29.

Bible accounts of funerary arrangements reveal that the Jews took great care in preparing the corpse for interment. Family and friends washed the body of the deceased, rubbed it with spices and fine oil, and wrapped it in cloths. (John 19:39, 40; Acts 9: 36-41) Neighbors and others could come to express their grief and console the family.—Mark 5:38, 39. ■

Was Jesus' burial typical of the Jewish burials?



Many Jewish families buried their dead in caves and tombs carved out of the soft rock common in many parts of Israel. In so doing, they followed the pattern set by the patriarchs. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and others were buried in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron.—Genesis 23:19; 25:8, 9; 49:29-31; 50:13.

Jesus was buried in a tomb carved out of a rock-mass. (Mark 15:46) Such a grave commonly had a narrow entrance. Inside, a number of niches, or shelflike spaces, were cut into the rock, where the bodies of deceased family members would be placed. After the flesh decomposed, the dried bones were collected and put in a stone box called an ossuary, as was the custom in Jesus' time. In this way, the family could make space in the tomb for future burials.

The Sabbath rest required by the Law of Moses prevented the Jews from caring for funeral arrangements on that day. Since Jesus died about three hours before the start of the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea and others buried him without having completely prepared his body for burial. (Luke 23:50-56) For that reason, some of Jesus' friends went to his tomb after the Sabbath, hoping to complete the process.—Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1. ■