

CHAPTER 5

DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS



A LOWLY BIRTH

The Nativity scenes on Christmas cards often portray a nice, cozy setting with clean hay, bathed in a warm, yellow glow. In reality, however, Jesus entered the world as a baby who didn't even have a proper place in which to be birthed. In Luke 2:4-7, we read a description of the conditions of the birth of Jesus. Not being able to find a place fit for human birth, they had to go to an animal stable, and the trough from which animals ate their slop had to be quickly emptied to receive the new baby. This was how Jesus chose to come to us—in a dirty, lowly manger.

We find it odd that the debut of the Savior of the world would be so obscure. We find it natural to look for him in the halls of power, in the courts of kings, in the places where most of us would like to operate. We think that if God wants our attention, he should do something grand or impressive. But unless we understand why Jesus was born in such a lowly place, we will never understand the heart of God.



Luke 2:4-7

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

DIVINE SELF-LIMITATION

Please read Philippians 2:4-8.



Philippians 2:4-8

⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

When a father wants to say something tender to a child, he often kneels so that his face is eye-level with the child's. He may also limit his vocabulary so that the child can understand. Limiting oneself is the very nature of love.



What are some examples of love and self-limitation going hand in hand in human relationships?

Author Philip Yancey describes this self-limitation:

Before Jesus, almost no pagan author had used "humble" as a compliment. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. The God who came to earth came not in a raging whirlwind nor in a devouring fire. Unimaginably, the Maker of all things shrank down, down, down, so small as to become an ovum... inside a nervous teenager. "Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb," marveled the poet John Donne. He "made himself nothing...he humbled himself," said the apostle Paul more prosaically.

One night in the cold, in the dark, among the wrinkled hills of Bethlehem, ... two worlds came together at a dramatic point of intersection. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. God, who knows no boundaries took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of morality. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation," an apostle would later write; "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." But the few eyewitnesses on Christmas night saw none of that. They saw an infant struggling to work never-before-used lungs. Could it be true, this Bethlehem story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe.¹

– Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*

SLEEVES ROLLED UP

There is a passage from the Bible that describes the state of mankind and God's heartache for us, written in Isaiah 59:8-16.



Isaiah 59:8-16

⁸ The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice in their paths;
they have made their roads crooked;
no one who treads on them knows peace.
⁹ Therefore justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not overtake us;
we hope for light, and behold, darkness,
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
¹⁰ We grope for the wall like the blind;
we grope like those who have no eyes;
we stumble at noon as in the twilight,
among those in full vigor we are like dead men.
¹¹ We all growl like bears;
we moan and moan like doves;
we hope for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.
¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before you,
and our sins testify against us;

for our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:
¹³ transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning back from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.
¹⁴ Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands far away;
for truth has stumbled in the public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.
¹⁵ Truth is lacking,
and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
¹⁶ He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.

What did God do when he saw that there was no one to intervene for mankind?

What does this say regarding God's heart for mankind?

Into this cycle of sin—all of humanity at once both the victims and perpetrators, sinning and being sinned upon—God enters with his sleeves rolled up. As much as mankind has fallen into the depth of sin, God travels that unfathomable distance downward to meet us here.

John 3:16, perhaps the most quoted verse in the entire Bible, reads:



John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God has sent an embodiment of himself, his son Jesus, to rescue us from the downward spiral of sin. The love of God is not merely a heart-warming affirmation—God made his love manifest by coming to us in the flesh.

A LOWLY DEATH

God—the timeless, all-powerful Creator—broke into time and space. This miracle, called the Incarnation, is bewildering enough. But in a turn of events that no one could have foreseen, Jesus came and did something that is so unbelievable that mankind has been amazed by it ever since. Jesus—an embodiment of God himself, the most powerful being to ever walk the earth—came to die the lowliest of deaths. He was crucified on the cross, the Roman government's official means of tortuously executing its worst criminals.

What is crucifixion like? The prisoner would first be publicly humiliated by being stripped naked. He was then laid on his back on the ground, while his hands were either nailed or roped to the horizontal wooden beam, and his feet to the vertical pole. The cross was then hoisted to an upright position and dropped into a socket which had been dug for it in the ground. Usually a peg or rudimentary seat was provided to take some of the weight of the victim's body and prevent it from being torn loose. But there he would hang, helplessly exposed to the intense physical pain, public ridicule, daytime heat and night-time cold. The torture would last several days.²

— John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

Jesus' death would have been just another tragic death of a heroic figure and no more, if it were not for Jesus' identity. If Jesus is who he claimed to be, if Jesus is indeed God incarnate, then we need to face the disturbing question: What, out of all the places he could be, is he doing hanging on the cross?

THE PRICE OF SIN

As we covered in Chapter 4, sin is real and a holy God cannot overlook evil or pretend that it doesn't exist.



God is the eternal antithesis to sin. God abominates sin with the whole intensity of his divine and perfect and holy nature. And God not only hates sin, he cannot tolerate it. God cannot compromise with sin. That is what we want, of course. We want God to compromise with sin. We want a God who says: 'All right, I know you have done this or that, but it is all right. Slip into heaven.' God cannot do that. God cannot compromise. There is no compromise between light and darkness, good and evil. They are eternal opposites, and God, because he is God hates sin. God must therefore punish sin.³

– Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross*

Why can't God just dismiss our sins and forget them?

Why does he take our actions and sins so seriously?

When we see instances of evil and sin, we recognize that there must be some kind of response. There must be justice. However, there is a problem. We are guilty. We have done wrongs that cannot be erased. And despite our efforts to rid ourselves of guilt and shame, these continue to press upon us. This sentiment is made clear by a heartbreak letter written to Ann Landers, an advice columnist, from a woman who signed her name as "Forever Guilty":

Six years ago on New Year's Eve, my husband John and I went to a party at the home of friends. We were in the mood to celebrate. After five years of scrimping and saving, we had bought a modest house and we had paid in full our college loans. John had one more semester at law school, and excellent job prospects. We were really in the mood to live it up. John and I are not drinkers, but that night there was a lot of champagne around and we had several glasses. Everyone was having a wonderful time—the party didn't break up until dawn. Actually, saying goodnight to the host was the last thing either of us remembers until after the accident. God forgive us—we ended the life of a thirteen year-old boy who was delivering bakery goods on his bicycle. Witnesses said that he was dragged more than 200 feet.

The doctors did everything they could to save him, but his injuries were too extensive. The lad never regained consciousness and died after four days. In those few moments when we got the news, the entire world changed. Never again will it be the same. That little boy who was the light of his parents' life will never grow up, fall in love, and be a source of pride to his family and a contributing member of society. Why? Because he happened to be in the wrong place at the

wrong time. We called on the family, but they refused to see us. Who could blame them? The day of the funeral, we sent roses and sat in the back row of the church. When we came home, we found rose petals and broken stems scattered over our front steps.

My husband never finished law school. He lost his job, he couldn't concentrate. He was unemployed for several months. I ate compulsively and gained forty pounds. Neither of us slept much. There were recurring nightmares. Intensive therapy and support from family and some friends kept us going. People kept saying, "Life goes on." It does if they mean the sun comes up every day. The kind of existence we had could hardly be called living. I must keep writing before I lose my courage. Maybe this letter will make an impression on someone. It only takes one drink for some drivers to become involved in a tragedy like ours. If you don't hurt, maim, or kill yourself or a loved one, you might kill a little boy who's trying to earn some extra pocket money.⁴

– Forever Guilty



Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sin leaves behind an indelible mark in time; our sin reaches out and disfigures people, relationships, and our very soul. We casually utter careless, cruel words and move on, probably forgetting we ever said anything unkind, perhaps even feeling like we did not do anything at all. But something HAS been done. And the person scarred by those words is in some way marred permanently.

There is something about life that is so obvious as to sound silly when expressed but in practice proves actually quite elusive to keep in mind. It is this: When we do something, we're actually doing it. Children at play often say: "That one did not count." As adults, we may harbor some illusion that our actions do not count, that somehow our conduct has no effect. Often, we are like a reckless driver who sets off a series of accidents and continues on his way, unaware of what he just did. Oblivious to the extent of the chain reaction we started, or the far-reaching effects we contribute to the web of sin in this world, we think our sins can easily be swept away. On the contrary, when we sin, in great and small ways alike, we are actually making a permanent mark on history and marring the moral fabric of the universe.

In what ways have you been living as if your sins don't count?

That moral fabric that we mar with our sins is none other than the very heart of God. Our offenses are against the very authority of God. It violates his holiness and challenges his rule over creation. It grieves his heart and brings wrath on our lives. Sin is vandalism against the structure of God's will and a stain upon the moral landscape he intended.



How can God be both just and merciful?

Psalm 38:3-4

³ There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.
⁴ For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.

Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The price of sin, the Bible tells us, is death—not merely the death of our physical bodies, but our spiritual death: separation from God forever.

We sinned. Yet we cannot bear the penalty of our sin; the debt is too great for us. Notice the dilemma: we are stuck between two dire choices: Do we ask God to just erase our sins and do away with justice? Or do we ask God to uphold justice and do away with sinners?

God unveils his surprising solution: God took on the payment for sin upon himself. Jesus paid the debt of sin by voluntarily dying on the cross on our behalf.

Therefore, the cross stands as a powerful testament to justice, authenticating the Bible's claim that indeed "the wages of sin is death" and upholding the pillars of justice. At the same time, the cross stands as a powerful demonstration of God's mercy, showing the extent of God's love to forgive sinners.

The Bible testifies to this unexpected culmination of justice and mercy:

Romans 3:25-26

²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

THE PRICE OF FORGIVENESS

Although forgiveness is offered freely, it is rarely actually free. Someone is bearing the cost of forgiveness.

Imagine a woman who discovers after 10 years of marriage that her husband has had a string of affairs throughout their marriage. What does she feel like doing? Leaving him in a fit of rage, wishing that he would writhe in pain all alone? He would deserve that. But let's say she decides to forgive him. She tries to do the impossible for the sake of the children and perhaps out of mercy toward her husband, who is now genuinely sorry. But this is no easy task. It is a double pain: first she has been wronged. The vows they made on their wedding day, all the years of her toil, faithful love and sacrifice, have been trampled upon by her husband. But now, in addition to that, she has to take on the burden of forgiving this man. It's like trying to swallow poison.



She says to herself: "I'll forgive him. I will receive this outrage; I will absorb this wrong. All that sin, let it all just flow into me, soak into my heart." She must take it all in and hopes that she will be able to cope, that she won't go crazy, that her heart is big enough that this poison won't kill it.

Some people do not recognize the difficulty, the near impossibility of real forgiveness because they have not had strong enough relationships of love to experience the woundedness of betrayal and the near-death experience of offering genuine forgiveness to the offending party in order that the relationship may be restored. Whoever has tried such a thing knows what a miracle and gift any act of forgiveness is.

Every act of genuine forgiveness is this costly; it involves a kind of death. If we understood how costly forgiveness is, we would not ever dare demand it, and when offered it, we would be struck with awe and gratitude.

Describe a time when you have felt "a kind of death" that comes when you try to forgive someone.

 "Before we see the cross as something done for us, we have to see it as something done by us."

– John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

Notice that there really is nothing that the husband can do, other than just feel very, very sorry, and very, very rotten inside. No amount of gifts, treats, good deeds, or "I'll make it up to you" promises

can alter the fact that the wrong has been committed. What can he do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He stands totally at the mercy of the forgiver. And he watches with helpless anguish the terrible pain his wife is willing to take on in order to salvage their marriage.



Similarly, every sinner stands utterly helpless before God.

If we, with our desensitized, calloused moral sense, sometimes react in disgust and shame at our sin, how much more is God's perfectly pure and holy heart affected by it? Yet, God says, "I will absorb it." The holy God says, "I will pay for it; I will absorb all that poison, the cesspool of all human sin, upon myself." This is the cross. All of our sins became a giant wound in the heart of God. This is what Jesus is doing there, hanging on a cross, having taken on the sins of the world, dying as a sacrificial lamb slain for your sins.

Are you in agreement that forgiveness is costly?

What is your response to the cost that God bears in order to forgive you?

It's important to note, once again: sin is against God. Sin is a rejection of God, a violation and offense to his holy nature and a rebellious challenge to his rule over our lives. Sin is not committed in a vacuum, or only against ourselves, or even just against our fellow men. It is not about letting ourselves down, or failing to actualize a beautiful life for ourselves, and so feeling disappointed and remorseful that we have not become the people we had hoped. Sin is primarily against God. And the cross is God's forgiving saving action toward wayward rebels, his magnanimous kindness toward those who have turned away from him.

Whether we reach out and grasp onto the lifeline God extends to us depends a lot on the degree to which we come to realize this.

WHAT THE CROSS SHOWS US

Parents experience a new kind of fear. Before you become a parent, the world could hurt you, of course, but with a child the world can hurt you in ways that truly terrify you. There is a pain greater than any that come from your own suffering: it is the suffering of someone you love.

Some years ago, there was a video against drunk driving that started out showing a family picture frame on top of the mantle. The mom's in the kitchen doing dishes, and there's a man in the living room. It seems like they've just finished dinner. A teenage boy is in his room listening to music.

In between the family scenes, the video cuts to a young woman driving on a rainy road at night. There is another car with a young man driving, with an open bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag from which he takes sips. He looks drunk, as he tries to focus on the road. The video returns to the family scene, and the next time we cut away to the scene on the road there's a slow motion head-on collision between the two cars. When the cars collide the video cuts away to a surreal scene back at the home. The entire sink full of dishes, water and all, explode upward as the mom flies violently backwards. The furniture in the living room flies and crashes into each other, and the man is thrown from the couch. The teenage boy is violently thrust upward. This is when the viewer realizes that she is the daughter of the couple and sister to the teenage boy. When that drunk driver collided with the young woman's car, it was as if a train had run into her house back at home. The drunk driver does not just kill the woman; he wrecks her entire family.

Imagine the scene of the drunk driver coming up to the grief-stricken parents of the young woman whom he has killed, and wondering why they are so deeply affected. After all, he killed the woman, but did nothing to them.

One of the insights that the cross gives us is this: our sins wreck God's heart. Human sin causes this much pain to God because of his great love for every person on earth. God is personally involved in every act of sin. The question "What does God have to do with my moral failings" misses this message of the cross.

In addition, the cross shows us the gravity of sin.

First, our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross. For ultimately what sent Christ there was neither the greed of Judas, nor the envy of the priests, nor the vacillating cowardice of Pilate, but our own greed, envy, cowardice and other sins, and Christ's resolve in love and mercy to bear their judgment and so put them away. It is impossible for us to face Christ's cross with integrity and not to feel ashamed of ourselves. Apathy, selfishness and complacency blossom everywhere in the world except at the cross. There these noxious weeds shrivel and die. They are seen for the tatty, poisonous things they are. For if there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed. It is only when we see this that, stripped of our self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, we are ready to put our trust in Christ Jesus as the Savior we urgently need. [...] Before we see the cross as something done for us, we have to see it as something done by us...Indeed, only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross, wrote Canon Peter Green, may claim his share in its grace.

– John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

Have you come to see that you have sinned against God?

How does the cross highlight the gravity of sin?

What does the cross of Jesus say regarding your sins?

And when I look at that cross and see him dying there, what he tells me is this: you have nothing whereof to boast. The cross tells me that I am a complete failure, and that I am such a failure that he had to come from heaven, not merely to teach and preach in this world, but to die on that cross. Nothing else could save us. I could not keep his teaching. How could I obey the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, I who cannot live up to my own code, who cannot please other people?

– Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross*

Not only does the cross show us the depth of our sins, but it also shows us the depth of God's love.

Read John 15:13, Romans 5:8, and 1 John 4:9-10.



John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.



Romans 5:8

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



1 John 4:9-10

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Jesus demonstrated the greatest love for us by laying down his life. He died for a world that hated and despised him. He was dying for the very people who were nailing him to the cross.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

If we were to stop our discussion of Jesus' life at the cross, what would we be left with? As inspiring as his life might have been, we would still be left wondering if Jesus was indeed who he claimed to be, since in the end, Jesus, like all human beings, was silenced by death. In fact, upon Jesus' capture and crucifixion, his followers fled and went into hiding, disillusioned and even bitter that they had falsely hoped that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. By all accounts, Christianity should have fizzled out and disappeared there, a few steps away from the dead body of Jesus near Jerusalem. However, history tells us that Christianity spread explosively shortly after Jesus' death. Why? It wasn't because his followers wanted to honor their teacher by passing on his wisdom. Their main message, from the very beginning, was that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that they were witnesses to this incomprehensible miracle.



Without the resurrection, Christianity would be meaningless. Jesus' claims about his identity as God incarnate and his promises of forgiveness would have been nothing more than unverifiable assertions, were it not for the resurrection. As Apostle Paul put it, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

A compelling case for the resurrection can be made using only facts that are historically attested.

However, the resurrection shows us that Jesus was indeed who he claimed to be. And humanity has been impacted by it ever since. What does this mean? Through the cross, Jesus made atonement for our sins. Through his resurrection, Jesus brings eternal life. The resurrection becomes the hope and end of the Christian faith, the proof that Jesus indeed has the authority and power to usher in eternal life.

Now, what is the missing chapter in this case, the chapter which Christians are offering? The story of the Incarnation is the story of a descent and resurrection. When I say "resurrection" here, I am not referring simply to the first few hours or the first few weeks of the Resurrection. I am talking of this whole, huge pattern of descent, down, down, and then up again. What we ordinarily call the Resurrection being just, so to speak, the point at which it turns. Think what that descent is. The coming down, not only into humanity, but into those nine months which precede human birth, in which they tell us we all recapitulate strange prehuman, subhuman forms of life, and going lower still into being a corpse, a thing which, if this ascending movement had not begun, would presently have passed out of the organic altogether, and have gone back into the inorganic, as all corpses do. One has a picture of someone going right down and dredging the sea bottom. One has a picture of a strong man trying to lift a very big, complicated burden. He stoops down and gets himself right under it so that he himself disappears; and then he straightens his back and moves off with the whole thing swaying on his shoulders. Or else one has the picture of a diver, stripping off garment after garment, making himself naked, then flashing for a moment in the air, and then down through the green, and warm, and sunlit water into the pitch-black, cold, freezing water, down into the mud and slime, then up again, his lungs almost bursting, back again to the green and warm and sunlit water, and then at last out into the sunshine, holding in his hand the dripping thing he went down to get. This thing is human nature; but associated with it, all Nature, the new universe.⁵

– C.S. Lewis, *The Grand Miracle*



Acts 2:32

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.

The resurrection goes hand in hand with the death of Jesus. Through the death of Jesus, we can be forgiven our iniquities. Through the resurrection, we can be raised to a new birth, a new life in Jesus Christ.

If Jesus actually resurrected, what implications would that have on your view of God, on Christianity, what the world is about, or what human beings are?

HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE?

Dead people don't come back to life. Over a hundred billion dead people testify to this fact. Some argue that since dead people don't resurrect, Jesus could not have resurrected. Therefore Jesus is not God

incarnate. But that would be a faulty circular argument. That kind of logic is akin to Christians arguing that the Bible is the word of God because the Bible says so. (That's a bad circular argument). Of course dead humans don't resurrect. But that's exactly the point: Jesus' resurrection shows that he's not a mere mortal but indeed who he claimed himself to be. So an honest investigator needs to be open to the evidence without dismissing it prematurely. That is where we turn our attention next. Is there any actual evidence for the resurrection of Jesus?

 "The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It is outstandingly different in quality and quantity."⁶

– Anthony Flew

EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

We have previously made the case that the New Testament, when evaluated as historical documents, demonstrates a high degree of reliability. If these arguments are valid, then we can reasonably believe that the resurrection occurred by the fact that the event is recorded in the New Testament. However, there is still a compelling historical case to be made for the reality of Jesus' resurrection even if we don't rely on the historicity of the Bible.

In this method, called the Minimal Facts Approach, we will first reconstruct four facts, the veracity of which are accepted even by skeptics and anti-Christian scholars for reasons that we will survey below. Then we will discuss what theories can best make sense of these facts.

Fact #1 – Crucifixion & Burial

Jesus was crucified under the Roman government and was given an honorable burial.

There is little to argue about the historicity of Jesus' crucifixion. Not only is it recorded in the New Testament, it is affirmed by non-Christian sources:⁷

- Josephus: Jewish historian
- Tacitus: Roman historian
- Lucian: Greek satirist
- Mara Bar-Serapion: Syrian philosopher
- Jewish Talmud [collection of Jewish laws and traditions]

The fact that Jesus was given an honorable burial is also hard to argue against. The Gospel accounts

record that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish ruling council called the Sanhedrin. The historicity of this burial account is agreed upon by the majority of scholars for the following reasons:

- “There was strong resentment against the Jewish leadership for their role in the condemnation of Jesus. It is therefore highly improbable that Christians would invent a member of the court that condemned Jesus who honors Jesus by giving him a proper burial.”⁸ [William Lane Craig, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” *Reasonable Faith*]
- If the burial account was fabricated, it would not make any sense for Christians to name such a high-profile figure as the owner of the tomb, since the truth of the burial account could easily be verified.
- “No other burial story exists. If the burial by Joseph were fictitious, then we would expect to find either some historical trace of what actually happened to Jesus’ corpse or at least some competing legends.”⁸ [William Lane Craig, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” *Reasonable Faith*]

Fact #2 – Empty Tomb

Shortly following his crucifixion, Jesus’ tomb was discovered empty.

Similarly, there is wide agreement on the historicity of the empty tomb:

- The site of Jesus’ burial was known to Christians and Jews alike. If the tomb were not empty, it would have been nearly impossible for a movement founded on the belief of the resurrection to have begun in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus was publicly executed and buried.
- There are written accounts of arguments between Christian leaders and opponents of Christianity. In these accounts, we can see that the early critics of Christianity accused Jesus’ disciples of stealing the body (see Matthew 28:12-13; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 108; Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 30). Before addressing the validity of their accusation (which we will do later), we can discern what such an accusation acknowledges as true: the only reason the opponents of Christianity were trying to give an alternative explanation for the empty tomb was that the tomb was, in fact, empty!



Matthew 28:12-13

And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”

- The fact that the Gospels report women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb supports the authenticity of the account, because this would have been embarrassing for the disciples to

admit. Given that women were not regarded as reliable witnesses in a court of law during that time, a fabricated account would not have placed women as the witnesses.

“Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die... His disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive.”⁹

– Flavius Josephus
Jewish-Roman historian (38-97 A.D.)

Fact #3 – Post-Mortem Appearances

The disciples believed that they had seen the risen Jesus.

Please note that the above factual claim is not that Jesus resurrected. The claim is that the disciples believed that they had seen the risen Jesus. The reason even non-Christian scholars concede this fact is outlined below:

The disciples were radically transformed. The same disciples that ran away during Jesus' trial and denied even knowing him suddenly emerged as men who were willing to die for teaching about the hope of resurrection.

What did they see that could change them so drastically? According to their own account, they saw the risen Jesus. And it wasn't only the previous followers of Jesus who were transformed.

Paul, the author of a large proportion of the New Testament, once arrested Christians and gave approval to their executions until he witnessed the risen Jesus.

James, the brother of Jesus, at first did not believe that his own brother was God, and so he was counted among the unbelievers. But Jesus also appeared to his brother James after the crucifixion (1 Corinthians 15:7), which caused him to be completely transformed and assume a position of leadership in the Jerusalem church in the first century. He was later killed for this belief in AD 62.



1 Corinthians 15:7

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Whether we believe the content of their testimony or not, what is clear from the history of the early church is that something happened to the disciples such that ordinary men from an obscure Roman province started a movement that transformed all of western civilization.

- Were the disciples lying when they claimed that they had seen Jesus resurrected? No reputable scholar holds to this position, because almost all of the disciples suffered persecution and

martyrdom for teaching about Jesus' resurrection.

Peter – crucified

Andrew – crucified

Matthew – killed by the sword

John – natural death, in exile for his beliefs

James, son of Alphaeus – crucified

Philip – crucified

Simon – crucified

Thaddaeus – killed by arrows

James, brother of Jesus – stoned

Thomas – killed by the spear

Bartholomew – beaten, then crucified

James, son of Zebedee – killed by the sword¹⁰



Of course, a lot of people have died for a lie, so what does this prove?

Yes, a lot of people have died for a lie, but they thought it was the truth. Now if the resurrection didn't take place (i.e., it was false), the disciples knew it. I find no way to demonstrate that they could have been deceived. Therefore these eleven men not only died for a lie—here is the catch—but they knew it was a lie. It would be hard to find eleven people in history who died for a lie, knowing it was a lie...¹⁰

—Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*

Given what we know of history and psychology, there is no doubt about the sincerity of the disciples. Even Gerd Ludemann, the leading German critic of the resurrection, admits, "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."

Instead, the secular scholars theorize that these post-mortem appearances were hallucinations. We will cover this theory in the Alternative Theories section below.

Fact #4 – Birth of the Church

Shortly after Jesus' death, the Christian religion erupted onto the scene, rapidly spreading throughout the Roman Empire.

The fact that Christianity spread rapidly in the early Roman world is so widely accepted that you can find these facts in any history of the early Roman Empire. What is interesting is the effect of

Christianity. Although a particular belief taking hold of a culture does not prove anything other than its appeal, the rate and pervasiveness with which Christianity spread is something that demands historical explanation.

- The fact that Christianity first spread quickly in Jerusalem is telling, because that's the very place where Jesus was publicly crucified and buried. If the disciples' claims were fabrications, there would have been a lot of people in Jerusalem who could have disproved the disciples, and Christianity would have died in its infancy.
- The impact that Christianity had on the rest of the Roman Empire was remarkable.

[The Christian church] did not exist until about A.D. 30, and then, just as its leader was executed and his movement seemed extinguished, it suddenly burst into life and spread like wildfire. Something must have started it off. What can you suggest if not the resurrection of Jesus? Those first disciples had collapsed like a house of cards when Jesus was arrested. They had run away, some of them back home to Galilee. But now nothing can silence them. What is the cause of it—if not the resurrection of Jesus? This new movement had no finances behind it. It had no proven leadership. It had no experience. It had no education. It had no training in evangelism. Yet it turned ancient society upside down. It was the start of a movement that survived the fall of the Roman Empire. It was the start of a movement that has penetrated every country on earth with the good news of Jesus and his love.¹¹

—Michael Green, *Who Is This Jesus?*

What could have happened that can make sense of these undisputed facts outlined above? Any alternative explanation must account for all of the accepted facts. Below, we will discuss some of the prevalent alternative explanations that have been attempted by non-Christian historians who reject the resurrection theory.

Alternative Theories

Disciples Stole the Body

As mentioned above, this is the earliest alternative theory, proposed by the religious authorities in Israel. However, we've already discussed the obvious sincerity that the disciples had regarding the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. Yes, they could have stolen the body and they could have lied about it. But they would not have died for the fabricated story that they just told. It is also highly implausible that unbelievers like Paul and James would have been co-conspirators of this plot. Therefore, this theory makes no sense of Fact #3 (Post-Mortem Appearances).

Disciples Made Up a Lie

Perhaps the disciples simply desired to construct a new religion. This theory, however, still does not reasonably address the resurrection accounts themselves. First, the resurrection accounts lack details which would normally be included/excluded in a lie. For example, historians note that the resurrection accounts in the New Testament do not actually describe the resurrection itself. They anticlimactically describe the empty tomb, and the disciples only find out about Jesus' resurrection through subsequent appearances of Jesus. If the disciples were conspiring to fabricate a religion surrounding the resurrection of Jesus, the fact that no one witnessed the actual moment of resurrection is quite puzzling—unless, of course, they are simply reporting how it actually happened. Second, if the disciples had made up a lie, the opponents of their movement could have simply produced the body of Jesus, which they couldn't do. Third, the disciples, as a result of their testimony, had little to gain except death and persecution—which is the reason historians concede that they were at least sincere in their belief. In short, this theory does not address Fact #2 (Empty Tomb) and Fact #3 (Post-Mortem Appearance).

Disciples Hallucinated

This view was first proposed by New Testament critic David Strauss in the 19th century. We know that the disciples were sincere in their belief; however, how do we know that they were not hallucinating?

Perhaps after the trauma of seeing Jesus on the cross, the disciples fooled themselves into seeing appearances of Jesus. Some reasons against such a belief are given below:

- Hallucinations, apart from drug use or mental illness, happen as the climax of a period of exaggerated wishful thinking, where the time, place and mood must be specifically conditioned to make a person open to hallucinations. However, when we turn to the Gospel narratives of the resurrection, these factors are missing. When the women first found the tomb empty, they wondered what happened, with one woman thinking that someone must have taken the body.
- Later, when Mary Magdalene and the other women witnesses reported that they saw Jesus, the disciples did not rejoice at the news of Jesus' resurrection. Rather, they dismissed the women, because "these words seemed to them an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). Far from being wishful thinkers, the disciples responded exactly as any skeptic would have. Thomas was adamant in his refusal to believe unless he could actually see and feel the nail-wounds (which he eventually did). Furthermore, the hallucination theory does not explain the encounters of Paul and James the brother of Jesus, since, as we have mentioned before, neither of these men were positively associated with Jesus' teachings.
- A bigger problem for the hallucination theory is that, whereas hallucinations are individual occurrences, these post-mortem appearances were seen by multiple people simultaneously. As Gary Collins, former president of the national association of psychologists wrote, "By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. [...] Since a hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it." Clinical psychologist Gary A. Sibcy has commented:

I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written

by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external referent.¹²

—Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*

- Moreover, these post-mortem appearances were multiple events happening to different people under various circumstances, spanning over 40 days—making the simultaneous hallucination theory exponentially more implausible.
- Also, this theory still fails to account for Fact #2 (Empty Tomb).

If the disciples hallucinated, in order for the hallucination theory to hold, one must maintain that there was a series of unprecedented simultaneous hallucinations; unbelievers also hallucinated, and the Jewish authorities also hallucinated an empty tomb. That seems to strain the hypothesis beyond acceptance.

Jesus' Resurrection is a Legend Developed Over Time

How do we know that the entire story of Jesus is not an accumulation of legends over time as the story has been told and retold? Although this theory is a popular idea to throw around, we can note that this theory actually denies all four facts. Because of the widespread acknowledgment of the previously discussed four facts, the legend hypothesis has been largely abandoned by critics of Christianity. Classicist Michael Grant summarizes:

...To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first rank scholars. In recent years, no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus or at any rate very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary.

¹³

Some of the reasons this “legend theory” can be safely dismissed is outlined below:

- If legend accumulation happened through increasingly exaggerated transmission of the story of Jesus, one would expect to see at least some amount of documentary evidence of this evolution, perhaps other competing legends that are written down in the earlier part of the first century. But no such evidence exists. Instead, what we have is a massive spread of the same story of Jesus’ resurrection from the earliest of manuscripts.
- There simply isn’t enough time for legendary accretion. As N. Sherwin-White, historian of Ancient Rome at Oxford University, points out, the process by which historical events are corrupted and

replaced with legend happens over centuries, not over a few decades.

- The New Testament is a collection of documents from multiple writers spanning several decades. If a legend built up, one would expect that the earlier writings would differ significantly from the later writings. Yet what we find throughout these writings, from early to late, is the same testimony about the divine identity of Jesus. Rather than being the culmination of a series of ever-increasing exaggerations, reference to the resurrection occurs from the earliest writings.
- Some conjecture a much grander theory imagining that the Church controlled all the documents and secretly corrupted the copies; however, such conspiracy theories cannot be sustained in light of history. For the first several centuries, Christianity was a persecuted religion, and the copies of the manuscripts were proliferating chaotically; there was no institutionalized Christianity interested in its image or any centralized Church to speak of that had any control over the documents.

For the above reasons and more, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* states the following about the legend theory:

Even before the Gospels were written, Christians were reflecting upon the meaning of what Jesus had been and what he had said and done. It is a mistake, therefore, to suppose that such reflection is a later accretion upon the simple message of the Gospels. On the contrary, the early Christian communities were engaged in witness and worship from the very beginning.¹⁴

– *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th ed.
Article on “Jesus Christ”

FINAL THOUGHT

What could have happened shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion which explains these historical facts? The primary sources contend that Jesus resurrected, which makes perfect sense of all the facts. Cambridge Professor C.F.D. Moule summarizes:

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? [...] [The] birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church...remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the church itself.¹⁵

– C.F.D. Moule
The Phenomenon of the New Testament

What is your response to the evidence for the resurrection?

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESURRECTION

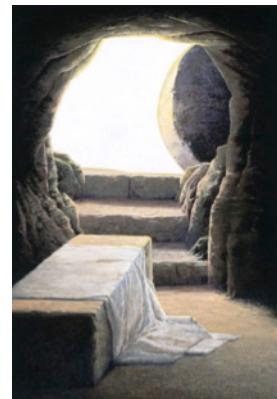
What does the resurrection mean for us? Why would scholars on both sides of the issue devote so much time to this argument? Let us, for a moment, reconsider the stakes involved.

The resurrection of Jesus is not an esoteric item of interest to those interested in Near Eastern studies. The resurrection, if it is true, means that the eternity written into the human souls is not a cruel cosmic joke. It means that death does not necessarily have the last word in life because Jesus overcame death.

An important point should be made here: the significance of the resurrection of Jesus hinges on the identity of Jesus, not on the resurrection itself. The resurrection itself, in isolation, would not mean much to us except to demonstrate that there are some things in this universe that we don't understand. However, the disturbing fact is that it was Jesus of Nazareth who resurrected...Jesus, whose birth and death were prophesied, who claimed himself to be God's Son, who claimed that he was going to die and rise again. The significance of the resurrection is that it was this man who rose from the dead. You might appreciate a person who waxes eloquent with lofty teachings and then dies. But what do you do with a man who claims deity and then rises from the dead? His resurrection vindicates his claims; it authenticates his teaching—it obligates all of us to listen to him.

On a more personal level, the resurrection validates his offer to us. Jesus said that he himself would one day pay the penalty of our sins by shedding his own blood on the cross. In Matthew 26:27-28, during the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and told his disciples, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus told us that God is like the waiting father, who desires to forgive his wayward children. Because the resurrection validates his identity, it means that those words are true. It means that's what God is actually like. It means the forgiveness offered by Christ is real.

Finally, it also means that we too can have hope in the resurrection, as Jesus promised to his



followers, "Because I live, you also will live..." (John 14:19). Romans 6:4 echoes this eternal hope: "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Jesus' death and resurrection makes life beyond the grave possible for every follower of Christ.

What is your personal response to this week's material?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. s.l. : Zondervan, 2002.
- 2 Stott, John. *The Cross of Christ*. s.l. : IVP Books, 2006.
- 3 Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *The Cross*. s.l. : Crossway Books, 1986.
- 4 Kushner, Harold. *Who Needs God*. s.l. : Fireside, 2002.
- 5 Lewis, C.S. *The Grand Miracle*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1970.
- 6 Habermas, Gary and Flew, Antony. *My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism*. *Philosophia Christi*. Winter, 2004, Vol. 6, 2.
- 7 Habermas, Gary and Licona, Michael. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. s.l. : Kregel Publications, 2004.
- 8 Craig, William Lane. "The Resurrection of Jesus". Reasonable Faith. [Online] [Cited: February 18, 2011.] <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5351>.
- 9 Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquities*. Chapter 18:63-64.
- 10 McDowell, Josh. *More Than a Carpenter*. s.l. : Living Books, 2009.
- 11 Green, Michael. *Who Is This Jesus?* s.l. : Regent College Publishing, 2007.
- 12 Licona, Michael. *The Resurrection of Jesus*. s.l. : InterVarsity Press, 2010.
- 13 Grant, Michael. *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*. s.l. : Scribners, 1977.
- 14 *Encyclopædia Britannica*. "Jesus Christ". 15th.
- 15 Moule, C.F.D. *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*. London: SCM, 1967.