

SESSION 1

The Truth of the Resurrection



QUESTION 1:

When have you been an eyewitness to an exciting event?

THE POINT

The resurrection of Christ is a historical fact.

THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

For most of us, national or global news stories are just that: stories we saw or read in the news. It may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but on rare occasions we may be able to say, “I was there!”

Of course, none of us were there at the momentous event that changed everything—the resurrection of Jesus Christ—but we joyfully celebrate it every spring. But do we embrace the resurrection as an actual historical event or simply regard it as spiritual folklore? Many favor the latter view. Others see the resurrection as an “inspiring story” about a great teacher named Jesus, but they do not believe He is the true Messiah who was resurrected for all mankind. *Jesus is just someone unenlightened people used to believe in, but nowadays we’re more sophisticated than all that religious nonsense.*

The apostle Paul had something to say about that! Paul made an objective truth claim in 1 Corinthians 15: Jesus did physically rise from the dead, and many people could attest to that. They could say, “I was there!”

Since Christ actually rose from the dead, His resurrection triggered monumental implications for humanity.

1 Corinthians 15:1-3

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;

2 By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

Paul was arguing against a culturally accepted idea that had influenced some Christian believers in Corinth. It's an idea familiar to us today: people simply don't rise from the dead.¹ So, Paul began this section on the resurrection with a clear reminder of the gospel message—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—and its resultant importance for the work of salvation.

Paul stated that he passed on to the Corinthian believers what he first received. Verses 3-5 are considered to be a creed that was formulated between the time of Jesus' resurrection and Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians. This letter is dated at around AD 55,² placing it within the first twenty-five years after Jesus' death. Knowing both the date of this letter and the time the earlier creed was conceived is important to us today because it demonstrates that even the earliest reports concerning Jesus included all three elements of the gospel story; they were not a fabrication by Christians at a much later date.

In verse 3, Paul set up his claims by declaring, "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures." Paul had in mind statements in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah's death, such as the "Suffering Servant" passage in Isaiah 53:5-9 and the description of piercing His hands and feet in Psalm 22:16. Paul tied Jesus' death back to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He also hinted at the language Jesus used when He instituted

the Lord's Supper before his death. "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28)."³ Paul stressed that it was critical for Christ to fulfill the Messiah's role in atoning for the sins of the world. Yet, for Jesus' atoning sacrifice to matter, Jesus actually had to die.

Critics of Jesus sometimes deny that He was a real person at all, let alone that He died. However, too much evidence testifies to the historical nature of Jesus' death to dismiss Jesus and claim He never was a real person. The Gospel accounts, as well as other New Testament authors, bear witness to the truth of Jesus' death. Yet, someone might say, "OK, but that's just the Bible" (as if the biblical evidence is no good). This is where the extra-biblical evidence comes into play.

More people than just the Gospel writers recorded accounts of Jesus' death, among other facts about His life. For example, non-Christians who also referred to Jesus' crucifixion in their writings include these:

- ▶ Tacitus, the most trusted ancient Roman historian;
- ▶ Josephus, the Jewish historian;
- ▶ Lucian of Samosota, the Greek satirist; and
- ▶ Mara Bar-Serapion, a prisoner writing to his son.⁴

None of these people had reason to support Jesus or His followers—some, in fact, were overtly opposed to them—which aids the trustworthiness of their comments about Christ's crucifixion. We might be tempted to think that corroborating testimony isn't that powerful, but having this much evidence concerning a historical person who lived two thousand years ago is rather impressive. We don't find this quantity of written testimony even for some of the prominent emperors of Rome, the most powerful empire in the world at that time. Because of the compelling historical testimony to Jesus' death, even John Dominic Crossan, certainly no conservative scholar, has written, "That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."⁵

QUESTION 2:

What makes the death of Jesus so significant?**1 Corinthians 15:4**

4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

We cannot overstate the significance of the resurrection and its historical nature: the very foundation of the Christian faith depends and hopes on the resurrection of Jesus. So Paul continued with the creed in this verse to lay out the basics of the gospel: not only did Christ die for our sins, but furthermore, He was buried and raised. Therein lies the uniqueness and importance of the gospel, the news that is profoundly good.

Jesus entered into the world as a human and willingly paid the consequence of human sin: death (Rom. 6:23). He did not die for His own sin—He had no sin (2 Cor. 5:21)—He died for ours. He died as a result of a horrific crucifixion, but His body did not decay (Acts 2:31). Rather, as Paul related to the Corinthians, Jesus was physically resurrected on the third day. This early creed may be referring to Psalm 16:10, a messianic prophecy in which King David declared that God’s “Holy One” would not see corruption. Perhaps the story of Jonah spending three days in the great fish also acted as a point of reference (Jonah 1:17; Matt. 12:40).

Jesus’ burial—the fact that he was laid in a physical tomb—reminds us he was a real human being with a physical body like other humans. He was not a disembodied spirit, a mythological god, or a demi-god. He was both fully human and fully God, which afforded Him the power to lay down his own life and the authority to take it up again (John 10:18).

Jesus' death and burial also remind us that sin has consequences. His death stands in stark contrast to our culture's current trend of redefining good and evil to be whatever each individual holds to be true, and generally believing those beliefs should not have any real consequences. Through Jesus' death, however, we see that good and evil have resulting consequences and that no one escapes the result of evil in the world. As a result of human sin, we all will die.

Yet, Jesus, the atoning sacrifice for *our* sin and evil, the One who took on death itself, didn't remain dead. Jesus provided the only defeat of death in the history of the world: a true resurrection.

Think about this: if you want to reverse death, what do you have to do? You have to overcome it with life. Jesus' resurrection was an actual historical event in which the power of God reversed death. Why did God do this? The answer goes back to creation when God declared that all He made "was very good" (Gen. 1:31). God's creation is worthy of restoration and redemption because it was good.

Critics might say resurrection sounds like a fairy tale to soothe those who are afraid to die. If the resurrection weren't true, Paul surely would not have labeled it a fairy tale. Far from it. He wrote a little bit later in this passage that if Jesus wasn't raised from the dead our faith is useless (1 Cor. 15:14,17). His description of such a situation was not the stuff of fairy tales, but of hopelessness.

QUESTION 3:

Why is the resurrection an essential element of the gospel?

1 Corinthians 15:5-8

5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:

6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.

KEY WORD: Cephas (v. 5)—*Cephas* (Aramaic: *Kephas*, meaning “rock”) was Paul’s usual name for the apostle Peter.

Paul continued in his line of reasoning by describing how Jesus appeared to many people after His resurrection. This argument makes no sense if Jesus’ body was still in the tomb, yet scholars generally agree that all evidence from the first century points to an empty tomb. In fact, ancient sources offer no other account of what happened to Jesus after His crucifixion. All we have are the accounts of those who saw Him.

Multiple accounts from different people reported seeing the resurrected Christ in various places and at various times. Paul reported that Jesus appeared to one or more of the disciples at least twice, and then later to a group of five hundred people. Paul stated this matter-of-factly, and if anyone questioned the truthfulness of what he said, they could ask those people themselves, since “the greater part remain unto this present.”

Oral tradition also supports the resurrection of Christ. As noted earlier, Paul appeared to be quoting an oral creed used in the early church. The idea that Jesus rose from the dead was not something that “evolved” as the church grew; they spoke boldly of it from the beginning. The first sermon recorded in the Book of Acts made a bold proclamation before thousands: “This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses” (Acts 2:32).

QUESTION 4:

What’s the importance of eyewitness testimony?

The disciples had nothing to gain from making up a story of resurrection. Indeed, quite the opposite happened: all the apostles except John were killed because of their proclamation of the risen Messiah who appeared to them. They went from terrified individuals in hiding after Jesus' crucifixion to bold proclaimers of the good news of resurrection and salvation in Christ. Their eyewitness testimonies, their lives, and their deaths stand as powerful evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection is also recorded in all four Gospels, inspired accounts written within 70 years of Jesus' life. The writings of the early church fathers, including Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius also mention the resurrection of Jesus.⁶

Paul noted that Jesus appeared specifically to James. As Jesus' half-brother, James knew Jesus probably better than any of the disciples—but he didn't believe Jesus was the Son of God or the Messiah. "For neither did his brethren believe in him" (John 7:5). We don't know the details of James's conversion, but after Jesus' death, James had a massive change of heart and mind. He not only believed in Jesus as the risen Savior, but he also led the church in Jerusalem, one of the most hostile places for the early church (Acts 15:12-21, Gal. 1:19). Something dramatically changed his point of view from disbelief to profound belief after Jesus' death.

Let's also not forget Paul—formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee of Pharisees—who was relaying this information to the Corinthian Christians. Saul was a man who actively persecuted the church and gave up his entire community and religious status to proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles. He was hardly a candidate for shoddy, easily falsifiable arguments. As a former Pharisee, Paul had been part of the highly educated elite. He knew logic and could skillfully present his case before various audiences (as seen in this chapter of 1 Corinthians and in Acts 17 and 26). He had not been an easy convert. Yet, he moved from persecuting those he viewed as Christian blasphemers of God to joining their ranks as the most

prominent evangelist for Christ. And all this happened because he saw the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:4-6).

QUESTION 5:

How can our group be a witness for others of Jesus' resurrection?

ENGAGE

Imagine you are the author of a blog about Christianity. Respond to the following comment you received in an email.

Dear Faith Blog,

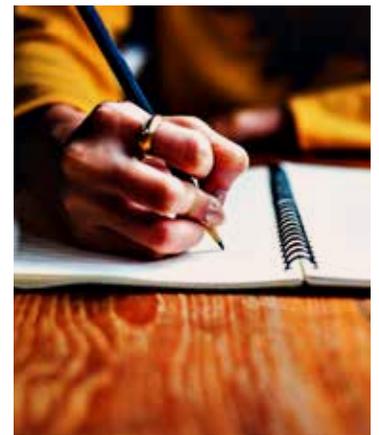
I've read a lot about the resurrection of Christ, but it just seems like a fairy tale to me. Can you give me valid proof that Christ rose from the grave?

Your Response:

LIVE IT OUT

The resurrection of Jesus is the most robust answer for what happened 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. What will you do with that truth?

- ▶ **Trust.** Commit your life to the risen Christ. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9).
- ▶ **Read.** For alternative theories about the resurrection and replies to those theories, read Jim Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 41-50.
- ▶ **Share.** Think of someone who needs to know the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Write that individual’s name down and pray for the person. Pray also for an opportunity to share about Christ’s resurrection. Be ready and willing to engage in a conversation on the powerful truth of the resurrection, the event that changed everything for us.



ENDNOTES

1 Adapted from Kistemaker, Simon J., *Baker New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1993) 523, Wordsearch ed.

2 Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 52.

3 This section adapted from Kistemaker, 523.

4 Habermas and Licona, 49.

5 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 145.

6 Habermas and Licona, 51-62.