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## *THE RESURRECTION, PART ONE*

We come now to the very climax of our study; to that key line of evidence that constitutes the heart of the case for the truth of Christianity. We have already considered many lines of evidence which we can see in the universe around us, which we can see within ourselves, and which we can draw from human experience, all of which prove beyond a reasonable doubt that God does exist, that the spirit world is real, and that supernatural events do occur.

We have considered the evidence and arguments against Christianity, and have seen that they fall far short of disproving its claims. We have considered many lines of evidence, both internal and external, including the powerful evidence from fulfilled

prophecy, which prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the Bible is the Word of God, and that Jesus is the Son of God. We could rest our case right here, having proved to the satisfaction of most that the claims of Christianity are true.

But even if we had none of the evidence thus far presented, the evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is, by itself, sufficient to prove our entire case. For not only is the resurrection the most important miracle in the Bible, but also, God, in His wisdom, has given us the strongest evidence for it. People who disbelieve the resurrection do so not because of the evidence, but in spite of the evidence. No other fact of ancient history is so well proven.

In addition to being the most important and the most conclusive line of Christian evidence, the resurrection is one of the two basic truths of the Gospel of Christ, the other being His atoning death. Paul expressed this as follows:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (I Cor. 15:1-4).

Obviously, if the evidence proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead, as the Bible says, then it also proves beyond a reasonable doubt that He is the Son of God, that the Bible is the Word of God, and that all the claims of Christianity are true. And that means that the other basic Gospel

doctrine, that He died for our sins, is true and we may absolutely rely on it. We may stake our lives on it.

Therefore, the fact of the resurrection is not only the climax of our study of Christian evidences, but also the very climax of all human history. If on that one glorious three day weekend, the Son of God actually died for our sins, and then arose from the grave, giving us the victory over death, then all other events of history are rendered insignificant by comparison. The view a person takes of the resurrection should, if responded to intelligently, determine the whole course of his life.

Prejudice against the resurrection is illogical. Most of it is based on the same bias against miracles that is used against the whole Bible. Paul marveled at this bias in his defense before King Agrippa:

Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:8).

Certainly the Creator of life can give life. To approach the evidence for the resurrection with a closed mind, denying the possibility of such a miracle, is to deny the existence of God, which we have already seen is unreasonable.

*TWO ADMISSIONS UNBELIEVERS HAVE  
BEEN FORCED TO MAKE*

Because of the overriding importance of the resurrection, unbelievers have expended much effort in their attempts to discredit or disprove it. Nevertheless, unbelievers have been forced to admit two highly significant facts: that the tomb was empty and that, from

the very beginning of the Church, the Christians believed in the resurrection.

The importance of this is obvious. Had unbelievers been successful in their efforts to date the origin of belief in the resurrection in the second or third century A.D., then they could have dismissed the whole matter as mere legend. But these efforts have been thoroughly refuted by early fragments of the New Testament, by early accounts of secular writers, by early Church practices, and by archeological evidence.

J.N.D. Anderson, OBE LLD, Professor of Oriental Laws and Director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in the University of London, in his book, *Christianity: the Witness of History*, The Tyndale Press, London, 1969, had this to say about the attempts to give a late date to belief in the resurrection:

The idea that these stories might have been legends rather than lies seems at first sight somewhat more plausible. Had it been possible to date the records a century or two after the event – and repeated attempts to do precisely this have been made by a series of brilliant scholars – the suggestion might have been feasible. But the attempt has decisively failed, crushed under a weight of contrary evidence; and there can be no reasonable doubt that the testimony to the resurrection can be traced back to the very first decade after the event. It seems meaningless, therefore, to speak of legends when we are dealing, not with stories handed down from generation to generation, but accounts given by the eyewitnesses themselves or attributed to them while they were still present to confirm or deny them.

Having been forced to admit that Christians believed in, and preached about, the resurrection from the very first, unbelievers have also had to concede that the

tomb was empty. Professor Anderson, in his book cited above, made these further comments:

So the empty tomb stands, a veritable rock, as an essential element in the evidence for the resurrection. To suggest that it was not in fact empty at all, as some have done, seems to me ridiculous. It is a matter of history that the apostles from the very beginning made many converts in Jerusalem, hostile as it was, by proclaiming the glad news that Christ had risen from the grave — and they did it within a short walk from the sepulchre. Their message could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned. Any one of their hearers could have visited the tomb and come back again between lunch and whatever may have been the equivalent of afternoon tea. Is it conceivable then, that the apostles would have had this success if the body of the one they proclaimed as risen Lord was all the time decomposing in Joseph's tomb? Would a great company of the priests and many hard-headed Pharisees have been impressed with the proclamation of a resurrection which was in fact no resurrection at all, but a mere message of spiritual survival couched in the misleading terms of a literal rising from the grave?

Having been compelled by the evidence to admit that the tomb was empty, and that belief in the resurrection goes back to the resurrection itself, unbelievers have been forced to devise explanations to account for these two undeniable facts. Because several of these theories have been widely publicized, and may have troubled the faith of some, it is worthwhile to consider them briefly. The weakness and absurdity of these attempted explanations will serve only to emphasize the strength of the evidence for the resurrection.

*1. The swoon theory.*

According to this theory, Jesus did not die on the cross, but only fainted and then revived in the tomb, and came forth and appeared to some of His disciples who believed He was risen.

The evidence clearly refutes this theory. Death by crucifixion was usually the result of asphyxiation. The weight of the body on the arms caused the chest muscles to compress the lungs and make breathing extremely difficult. By raising the body with his legs, the victim could relieve this pressure and draw air into his lungs. Thus, a man in good physical condition, could fight off death for a considerable time. When the executioners were ready to complete their job, they used a heavy mallet to break the victims legs, who, being then unable to raise his body, quickly suffocated.

Jesus, of course, was not in good physical condition when He was nailed to the cross. Pilate, who did not want to sentence Him to death, had ordered Him scourged, hoping this would satisfy the Jewish leaders. Roman scourging was performed with a multi-thonged whip weighted at the tips with bits of metal or bone. It was designed to rip the skin and flesh from the body and often resulted in the death of the victim. The terrible shock and loss of blood from the scourging, plus the lack of food, loss of sleep, and abuse which He had suffered all night, left Him so weakened that He fell under the weight of the cross. It was obvious that He would not be able to stave off asphyxiation for more than a few hours.

John, the only apostle with the courage to stand near the cross, tells us what happened:

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced" (John 19:31-37).

The execution squad was composed of Roman soldiers under the command of a centurion. They had orders to execute Jesus and they were trained to obey orders. They could see Jesus was dead. No doubt His body was motionless, slumped down with the weight on His arms, compressing His lungs, unable to breath. This was the position of a man who is dead, not one who has only fainted. But to be sure, one soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' side. Since He was not pushing His weight up with His legs, there was no need to break the bones. Unknowingly, the soldiers had fulfilled two more Old Testament prophecies.

What happened next is also carefully recorded for us by John:

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited

Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there (John 19:38-42).

Joseph and Nicodemus were Jewish leaders, no doubt intelligent and well educated. In performing the difficult task of removing the body from the cross and wrapping it in the burial clothes with the seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes, they would surely have known if the body was still warm and alive and breathing. As it had been to the soldiers, it was obvious to them that Jesus was dead. There is not one shred of evidence to support the suggestion that Jesus only fainted on the cross.

Nor is that the only problem with the "swoon theory." Professor Anderson, in his book cited above, points out even more difficulties:

But even if, for argument's sake, it is postulated that His life might not have been wholly extinct, is it really likely that to lie for hours in a rock-hewn tomb in Jerusalem at Easter, when it can be distinctly cold at night, would so far have revived Him, instead of proving the inevitable end to His flickering life, that He would have been able to loose Himself from yards of grave clothes weighted by pounds of spices, roll away a stone which three women felt incapable of tackling, and then walk miles on wounded feet?

But it was the sceptic, D.F. Strauss, who, as it seems to me, finally exploded this theory when he wrote: 'It is impossible that a being who had stolen half dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill,

wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence . . . could have given the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation . . . could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship.' Nor could the disciples ever have made such a mistake unless Christ Himself had deliberately exploited their credulity.

## *2. The Passover plot.*

According to this theory, Jesus, Nicodemus, and a few others, conspired to stage the sacrificial death on the cross. A co-conspirator was to be ready at the cross with a spongeful of some narcotic to dull the pain and induce unconsciousness. Then Nicodemus and his helpers were to take the apparently lifeless body and revive Him and pretend that He had arisen. Although the plot was foiled by the spear thrust in His side, Jesus did live long enough for the conspirators to convince the disciples that He had risen from the tomb, after which He was secretly buried.

Of course, there is no evidence to support this theory. It rests on nothing but speculation, and faces many difficulties. Even if the conspirators had not foreseen the spear in the side, they would have expected the Roman soldiers to make certain that Jesus was dead, probably by breaking His legs. They could not have expected to get Him off the cross still alive.

Even if they had been able to get Jesus off of the cross alive, and into the tomb, they would have immediately encountered another problem. The guard, unexpectedly stationed at the tomb, would have prevented them from getting Jesus back out of the tomb.

Furthermore, the theory requires that the secret be kept perfectly and permanently by all the co-conspirators, something that human nature makes most unlikely. Nor does there seem to be any reason or purpose for the whole plot. There is no evidence that any of the alleged conspirators gained anything from the deception.

The theory does not explain the numerous appearances of Jesus to persons who supposedly were not aware of the plot – appearances that involved such close contact that there could have been no mistake of identity. Lastly, this theory requires that Jesus be a deceiver, party to a blasphemous falsehood. In view of all that we know about the life and teachings of Jesus, even unbelievers find it hard to accept this. The so-called “Passover Plot” is bizarre speculation, nothing more.

### *3. The hallucinated woman theory.*

A hallucination is the apparent perception of sights, sounds, etc. which are not actually present. By this theory, Mary Magdalene was in love with Jesus and was so devastated by His death that she hallucinated, thinking that she saw Him, and convinced the disciples that He had risen.

In the first place, Mary never could have convinced the disciples of such a thing. Jewish men of that time did not consider women as equals and would have quickly discounted Mary’s story. In fact, they refused to believe when at least five women reported their actual encounter with the risen Lord:

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense (Luke 24:9-11).

In addition, this theory does not explain the numerous appearances that the risen Lord made to others — to the apostles, to several individuals, and even to a crowd of over five hundred at one time. Also unexplained is the fact the the tomb was empty. There is really nothing to be said in favor of this theory.

#### *4. The hallucinated witnesses theory.*

By this theory, not just Mary Magdalene, but all of the people who saw the risen Lord, had hallucinations. Since hallucinations are subjective impressions within a persons mind, they do not occur to large numbers of people at the same and in the same way. They usually occur to someone in an emotional or drugged condition, and usually involve something expected and hoped for. The disciples were discouraged and disillusioned after the crucifixion, and certainly were not expecting the resurrection. In fact the first witnesses of the resurrection had difficulty convincing the others. Obviously conditions were not right for any hallucinations, let alone mass hallucinations.

Furthermore, this theory does not explain the fact that the disciples talked with Jesus, touched Him, and ate with Him. Nor does it explain the fact that the tomb was empty. Lastly, it does not explain why the appearances suddenly ceased — which Christians know was because Christ returned to heaven.

*5. The vision or spiritual appearance theory.*

According to this theory, Jesus did appear to His disciples but only as a spirit or supernatural vision. Note that this theory substitutes one supernatural event for another, which seems pointless. However, it was to head off just such a theory that Jesus ate with the disciples and insisted that they touch Him:

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (Luke 24:36-43).

It is clear that Jesus caused the disciples to believe in His bodily resurrection, and if it was only His spirit they saw, then Jesus was deliberately deceiving them. As stated before, in view of His perfect life and teaching, few are willing to believe that Jesus was dishonest. In addition, this theory fails to explain the empty tomb.

*6. The optical illusion or mirage theory.*

This is an attempt to explain the resurrection on naturalistic grounds involving the action of light waves and reflections. However, mirages are not this elaborate. They are hazy, indistinct, and distant. Thus, this theory does not explain the appearances inside

rooms, nor the talking, touching, and eating. It does not explain the repeated appearances at different places and to many people. And it does not explain the empty tomb.

*7. The mistaken women theory.*

According to this theory, the women who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning, being strangers in town, went to the wrong tomb which happened to be empty. A young man who happened to be out there, guessed that they were looking for Jesus and said to them, "He is not here. See where they laid Him," and at the same time pointed to the correct tomb. But the women were so overjoyed that they rushed off without seeing the man point, and convinced the disciples that Christ had risen from the grave. This theory makes use of the following scripture:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' " Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (Mark 16:5-8).

As can be seen, this theory uses only part of what the angel said to the women, particularly leaving out the key statement, "He has risen!" We have already seen that the disciples were reluctant to believe the women, and would not have been convinced by this story. Furthermore, this theory does not explain the

numerous eyewitness reports by people who saw Jesus, nor does it explain the empty tomb. If the disciples did not check out the correct tomb, we can be sure the Chief Priests and Pharisees did.

*8. The falsehood theory.*

This is the claim that the disciples knew Jesus had not risen, but conspired to make the false claim that He had. Note first that this does not explain the empty tomb. The disciples were going everywhere witnessing to the resurrection and the Jewish leaders were alarmed by this preaching and were doing all they could to stop it. Certainly they would have checked the tomb, and if the body was still there they could have quickly disproved the resurrection claims. This they could not do because the tomb was empty.

Also, this theory requires a perfectly kept secret by a large number of people. Not only the apostles, but also many other disciples who claimed to have seen Him, were in on the fraud. Even top secret government information cannot be kept secret when that many people know about it. Furthermore, this theory is inconsistent with the character and conduct of the apostles and many other disciples, as will be pointed out under theory No. 9.

*9. Theft of the body by His friends theory.*

This is the claim that Jesus' followers came by night and stole His body from the tomb and then claimed He had risen. Note that the tomb was sealed and guarded by soldiers. It is not reasonable to believe that the frightened, disillusioned disciples would face those soldiers and risk breaking an official seal. Nor is it reasonable to believe that a whole guard of soldiers

would go to sleep on duty at the same time, and would sleep so soundly that not one was awakened by the noise involved in rolling away the large stone and removing the body. And again, this theory requires a perfectly kept secret by a large number of people. But most importantly, this theory, and also the "falsehood theory" discussed above, are inconsistent with all we know about the character and conduct of the people involved. Comments made by Professor Anderson in his book previously cited are appropriate here:

First, then, the problem of the empty tomb. The earliest attempt to explain this phenomenon is recorded in Matthew's Gospel, where we are told that the Jewish leaders bribed the guard which had been set to watch the sepulchre to say that the disciples had come by night and stolen the body. But no one, so far as I know, accepts this story today. It would be incredible both in ethics and psychology. Imagine the apostles raiding the tomb by night, stealing the body, burying it furtively in some other place, and then proceeding to foist this miserable fraud upon the world. This would run totally contrary to all we know of them: their ethical teaching, the quality of their lives, their steadfastness in suffering and persecution. Nor would it begin to explain their dramatic transformation from dejected and dispirited escapists into witnesses whom no opposition could muzzle.

*10. Theft of the body by His enemies theory.*

This is the suggestion that the body was moved to some other location on orders of the Chief Priests or Pilate. But the empty tomb alone would not have convinced the disciples. They would have thought, just as Mary Magdalene did, that someone had removed the body:

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him" (John 20:13).

But Jesus appeared to the disciples numerous times, talking to them, eating with them, and touching them, and this, together with the empty tomb, convinced them beyond any doubt that He was alive.

Furthermore, within a few weeks, the disciples were going all over Jerusalem preaching the resurrection, much to the dismay of the authorities. If they had moved the body, they would certainly have said so and, if necessary, have produced the body itself to stop such preaching. Christianity would never have gotten off the ground if its enemies had been able to produce the body of Jesus.

#### *11. Removal of the body by Joseph of Arimathea.*

It has been suggested that Joseph put the body in his tomb only temporarily and later moved it to another location. Again, the empty tomb alone would not have convinced the disciples, and again this theory does not explain the numerous appearances which Jesus made to His disciples.

Also, Joseph could not have done this secretly. He would have needed official permission to open the sealed tomb, and he would have needed help moving the body. Thus, even if Joseph had been so devious as to allow the false doctrine of the resurrection to continue, others would have told what happened. Certainly, the officials who gave permission to open the tomb would have reported this, and probably would have required Joseph to reveal the location of the body so the preaching of the resurrection could be stopped.

By now, two things should be obvious: 1. That unbelievers have gone to a great deal of effort to explain away the empty tomb and the fact that Christians believed in the resurrection from the very first; and, 2. That these efforts have been completely unsuccessful. All this serves to emphasize the overriding importance of the resurrection, even in the eyes of unbelievers. Even they recognize that, if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true and secular humanism is false.

Admissions against interest are important evidence in the trial of a lawsuit. When your opponent is forced to admit facts which are favorable to your case, and when his attempts to explain away these facts have failed, then you can use these facts as evidence and can build upon them with other evidence. This is what we will do in Lesson 12, where we will proceed with the affirmative evidence for the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

### Study Questions

1. Why is the resurrection the most important miracle in the Bible?
2. Explain why the one weekend of the resurrection is the very climax of all human history.
3. Why is it illogical to believe that God cannot raise the dead?
4. Why have unbelievers been forced to admit that the tomb was empty?
5. Why is it important that the historical and archeological evidence shows that Christians believed in the resurrection from the very beginning of the Church?

6. What is the swoon theory and why it it unbelievable?

7. Why is it impossible to explain away the resurrection as hallucinations?

8. Why is it impossible to explain away the resurrection as optical illusions?

9. Why is it unreasonable to believe that the friends of Jesus stole His body and lied about the resurrection?

10. Why is it unreasonable to believe that the Chief Priests ordered the body moved and this caused the disciples to believe in the resurrection?