

DOCTRINE



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Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe

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CHAPTER 9

RESURRECTION: GOD SAVES

*Jesus said . . . “I am the resurrection and the life.
Whoever believes in me, though he die,
yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes
in me shall never die.”*

JOHN 11:25–26

If Jesus is dead, then Christianity is dead. If Jesus is alive, then Christianity is alive. Paul himself declared as much in 1 Corinthians 15:17: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no savior, no salvation, no forgiveness of sin, and no hope of resurrected eternal life. Apart from the resurrection, Jesus is reduced to yet another good but dead man and therefore is of no considerable help to us in this life or at its end. Plainly stated, without the resurrection of Jesus, the few billion people today who worship Jesus as God are gullible; their hope for a resurrection life after this life is the hope of silly fools who trust in a dead man to give them life. Subsequently, the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection is, without question, profoundly significant and worthy of the most careful consideration and examination.

WHAT IS RESURRECTION?

Defining what resurrection does and does not mean is incredibly important. Resurrection does not mean revivification. *Revivification* occurs when someone who dies comes back to life only to die again; revivification happens throughout Scripture.¹ Unlike revivification, *resurrection* teaches that someone dies and returns to physical life forever, or what the Bible calls eternal life,² patterned after Jesus' death and resurrection.³

Resurrection does not mean there is a second chance for salvation after death, as both reincarnation and purgatory wrongly purport. *Reincarnation* is the belief that the human soul individually migrates from one body to another through a succession of lives in pursuit of complete purification where the soul is finally joined to the ultimate reality of the divine. *Purgatory* wrongly teaches that following death there is an extended period of potential maturation and purification that allows someone to then enjoy heaven as an unbeliever. Hebrews 9:27 refutes both errors: "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."

Resurrection does not mean that everyone, believers and unbelievers alike, avoid hellish punishment in the end. Universalism wrongly teaches that everyone is eventually saved and goes to heaven. Annihilationism wrongly teaches that at some point following death unbelievers simply cease to exist rather than going to an eternal hell. Instead, Daniel 12:2 declares that both believers and unbelievers will rise, and some will go to everlasting heaven and others to everlasting hell, which refutes both errors: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Resurrection does not mean what is called "soul sleep," where both the body and the spirit lie at rest until the resurrection, as is taught by some Seventh-Day Adventists. When the New Testament speaks of

¹E.g., 2 Kings 4:18–37; Matt. 9:18–26; 27:52–53; Mark 5:22–43; Luke 8:40–56; John 11:1–44; Acts 9:36–42; 20:9–12.

²E.g., John 5:24.

³1 Corinthians 15.

believers as “asleep,” it does so as a metaphor to distinguish the death of believers from the death of unbelievers. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says:

The Bible also uses sleep as a metaphor for the death of the righteous. “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). In Christ, death is nothing more than a nap from which the righteous will awaken to endless day.⁴

This is why Paul speaks of his death as gain, because it means his soul goes to be with Jesus: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”⁵

Neither does resurrection simply mean life after death. This is because life after death does not initially include the physical body; rather, the body lies in the ground while the spiritual soul goes to be with God. Paul speaks of believers being “away from the body and at home with the Lord.”⁶

The Bible teaches that we are both a material body and an immaterial soul. Upon death these two parts are separated. Our body goes into the ground, and as believers our soul goes to be with God. For unbelievers, their soul goes to a place called by such names in the Bible as a “prison”⁷ and “Hades.”⁸ That place is a place of just suffering for unbelievers until they stand before Jesus and are sentenced to the conscious eternal torments of hell.⁹

Resurrection refers to the eventual reuniting of our body and soul. In his impressive seven-hundred-page tome *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, notable New Testament scholar N. T. Wright provides a most helpful definition of resurrection, which he repeats throughout the book as one of his main points. Wright proposes that in the first century, *resurrection* did

⁴“Sleep,” in Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 799.

⁵Phil. 1:21.

⁶2 Cor. 5:8.

⁷1 Pet. 3:19.

⁸Luke 16:19–31.

⁹Rev. 20:13–14.

not mean “life after death” in the sense of “the life that follows immediately after bodily death.”¹⁰ According to Wright:

Here there is no difference between pagans, Jews and Christians. They all understood the Greek word *anastasis* and its cognates, and the other related terms we shall meet, to mean . . . new life after a period of being dead. Pagans denied this possibility; some Jews affirmed it as a long-term future hope; virtually all Christians claimed that it had happened to Jesus and would happen to them in the future.¹¹

In other words, *resurrection* was a way of “speaking of a new life *after* ‘life after death’ in the popular sense, a fresh living embodiment *following* a period of death-as-a-state.”¹²

According to Wright, the meaning of resurrection as “life after ‘life after death’” cannot be overemphasized. This is due in large part to the fact that much modern writing continues to use “resurrection” as a synonym for “life after death.” In contrast, belief in “resurrection” for the ancients meant belief in what Wright calls a “two-step story”:¹³

Resurrection itself would be preceded . . . by an interim period of death-as-a-state. Where we find a single-step story—death-as-event being followed at once by a final state, for instance of disembodied bliss—the texts are not talking about resurrection. Resurrection involves a definite *content* (some sort of re-embodiment) and a definite *narrative shape* (a two-step story, not a single-step one). This meaning is constant throughout the ancient world.¹⁴

Wright reiterates what resurrection is and what it is not:

“Resurrection” denoted a new embodied life which would *follow* whatever “life after death” there might be. “Resurrection” was, by

¹⁰See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 30–31.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 31.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

definition, not the existence into which someone might (or might not) go immediately upon death; it was not a disembodied “heavenly” life; it was a further stage, out beyond all that. It was not a redescription or redefinition of death. It was death’s reversal.¹⁵

WHAT WERE ANCIENT NON-CHRISTIAN VIEWS OF THE AFTERLIFE?

It is commonly purported by some that the entire idea of a bodily resurrection was in fact not a novel idea but one borrowed from other ancient philosophies and spiritualities. Wright has done a painstakingly exhaustive and revolutionary study of ancient beliefs regarding resurrection that is incredibly helpful. Most books on the resurrection of Jesus begin by studying the Gospel narratives and then work outwardly from this vantage point to an analysis of the appropriate pagan and Jewish sources found in antiquity. Wright takes the exact opposite approach. He begins with a study on resurrection (or, better, the lack thereof) in ancient paganism and then narrows the scope of his investigation tighter and tighter, concluding with a study of the resurrection as recorded by the writers of the canonical Gospels. Wright concludes, “In so far as the ancient non-Jewish world had a Bible, its Old Testament was Homer. And in so far as Homer has anything to say about resurrection, he is quite blunt: it doesn’t happen.”¹⁶

The idea of resurrection is denied in ancient paganism from Homer all the way to the Athenian dramatist Aeschylus, who wrote, “Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection.”¹⁷ Wright provides a helpful summary: “Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. Many believed that the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believed in resurrection.”¹⁸

One of the most influential writers in antiquity was Plato. Wright summarizes Plato’s views on the soul and body as follows:

¹⁵Ibid., 83.

¹⁶Ibid., 32.

¹⁷Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647–48, quoted in Wright, *Resurrection*, 32.

¹⁸Wright, *Resurrection*, 35.

The soul is the non-material aspect of a human being, and is the aspect that really matters. Bodily life is full of delusion and danger; the soul is to be cultivated in the present both for its own sake and because its future happiness will depend upon such cultivation. The soul, being immortal, existed before the body, and will continue to exist after the body is gone.¹⁹

This dualistic view promoted a tendency to see the body as a prison of the soul that made death something to be desired. According to Wright, “in Greek philosophy, care for and cure of the soul became a central preoccupation.”²⁰ Furthermore, “neither in Plato nor in the major alternatives just mentioned [e.g., Aristotle] do we find any suggestion that resurrection, the return to bodily life of the dead person, was either desirable or possible.”²¹

This view is also evident in the writings of Cicero:

Cicero is quite clear, and completely in the mainstream of greco-roman thought: the body is a prison-house. A necessary one for the moment; but nobody in their right mind, having got rid of it, would want it or something like it back again. At no point in the spectrum of options about life after death did the ancient pagan world envisage that the denials of Homer, Aeschylus and the rest would be overthrown. Resurrection was not an option. Those who followed Plato or Cicero did not want a body again; those who followed Homer knew they would not get one.²²

After surveying several other ancient pagan writers and philosophers, Wright concludes: “Nobody in the pagan world of Jesus’ day and thereafter actually claimed that somebody had been truly dead and had then come to be truly, and bodily, alive once more.”²³

Death, in ancient paganism, was a one-way street. According to Wright:

¹⁹Ibid., 49.

²⁰Ibid., 53.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 60.

²³Ibid., 76.

The road to the underworld ran only one way. Throughout the ancient world, from its ‘bible’ of Homer and Plato, through its practices (funerals, memorial feasts), its stories (plays, novels, legends), its symbols (graves, amulets, grave-goods) and its grand theories, we can trace a good deal of variety about the road to Hades, and about what one might find upon arrival. As with all one-way streets, there is bound to be someone who attempts to drive in the opposite direction. One hears of a Protesilaus, an Alcestis or a Nero *redivivus*, once or twice in a thousand years. But the road was well policed. Would-be traffic violators (Sisyphus, Eurydice and the like) were turned back or punished. And even they occurred in what everybody knew to be myth.²⁴

Wright notes:

We cannot stress too strongly that from Homer onwards the language of ‘resurrection’ was not used to denote ‘life after death’ in general, or any of the phenomena supposed to occur within such a life. The great majority of the ancients believed in life after death; many of them developed . . . complex and fascinating beliefs about it and practices in relation to it; but, other than within Judaism and Christianity, they did not believe in resurrection.²⁵

Furthermore, not even Judaism believed in the resurrection of an individual from death in the middle of history. Rather, their understanding was that their entire nation alone would rise from death together at the end of history. William Lane Craig’s lengthy studies of the resurrection of Jesus Christ culminated in the publishing of two scholarly books on the issue.²⁶ Craig asserts:

Jewish belief always concerned a resurrection at the end of the world, not a resurrection in the middle of history. . . . The resurrection to glory

²⁴Ibid., 81–82.

²⁵Ibid., 82–83.

²⁶Craig spent two years as a fellow of the Humboldt Foundation studying the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the University of Munich. See William Lane Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus During the Deist Controversy* (Lewiston, ID: Edwin Mellen, 1985), and *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, ID: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

and immortality did not occur until after God had terminated world history. This traditional Jewish conception was the prepossession of Jesus' own disciples (Mark 9:9–13; John 11:24). The notion of a genuine resurrection occurring prior to God's bringing about the world's end would have been foreign to them. . . . *Jewish belief always concerned a general resurrection of the people, not the resurrection of an isolated individual.*²⁷

Finally, noted historian and professor Edwin Yamauchi has spoken to this matter with great clarity based upon his lifetime of scholarly research.²⁸ Yamauchi has said that there is no possibility that the idea of a resurrection was borrowed because there is no definitive evidence for the teaching of a deity resurrection in any of the mystery religions prior to the second century.²⁹ In fact, it seems that other religions and spiritualities stole the idea of a resurrection from Christians! For example, the resurrection of Adonis is not spoken of until the second to fourth centuries.³⁰ Attis, the consort of Cybele, is not referred to as a resurrected god until after AD 150.³¹

Some have postulated that the *taurobolium* ritual of Attis and Mithra, the Persian god, is the source of the biblical doctrine of the resurrection. In this ritual, the initiate was put in a pit, and a bull was slaughtered on a grating over him, drenching him with blood. However, the earliest this ritual is mentioned is AD 160, and the belief that it led to rebirth is not mentioned until the fourth century. In fact, Princeton scholar Bruce Metzger has argued that the *taurobolium* was said to have the power to confer eternal life only after it encountered Christianity.³²

The myths of pagans are admittedly fictitious events centered on the

²⁷William Lane Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 160, emphases in original.

²⁸Yamauchi has immersed himself in no less than twenty-two languages and is an expert in ancient history, including Old Testament history and biblical archaeology, with an emphasis on the interrelationship between ancient near Eastern cultures and the Bible. He is widely regarded as an expert in ancient history, early church history, and Gnosticism. He has published over eighty articles in more than three dozen scholarly journals and has been awarded eight fellowships. His writing includes contributing chapters to multiple books as well as books on Greece, Babylon, Persia, and ancient Africa.

²⁹Edwin Yamauchi, "Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?" *Christianity Today*, March 15, 1974 and March 29, 1974, 4–7, 12–16.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²See Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 174–75; and Bruce

annual death and rebirth of vegetation and harvest cycles. Conversely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is put forth as a historical fact in a place, at a time, with eyewitnesses and numerable lines of compelling evidence. Furthermore, not only is the theory that Christianity borrowed the concept of resurrection untrue, but it also completely ignores the historical facts of the empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR JESUS' RESURRECTION?

The biblical evidence for Jesus' resurrection is compelling and can be briefly summarized in ten points. Each of these points is consistent, and together they reveal that the Bible is emphatically and repeatedly clear on the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

1) Jesus' resurrection was prophesied in advance. Roughly seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah promised that Jesus would be born into humble circumstances to live a simple life, die a brutal death, and then rise to take away our sin.³³

2) Jesus predicted his resurrection. On numerous occasions Jesus plainly promised that he would die and rise three days later.³⁴

3) Jesus died. Before Jesus died, he underwent a sleepless night of trials and beatings that left him exhausted. He was then scourged—a punishment so horrendous that many men died from it before even making it to their crucifixion. Jesus was crucified, and a professional executioner declared him dead. To ensure Jesus was dead, a spear was thrust through his side and a mixture of blood and water poured out of his side because the spear burst his heart sac.³⁵ Jesus' dead body was wrapped in upwards of one hundred pounds of linens and spices, which, even if he was able to somehow survive the beatings, floggings, crucifixion, and a pierced heart, would have killed him by asphyxiation. Even if through all of this Jesus somehow survived (which would in itself be a miracle), he could not have

M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1968), 11.

³³Isa. 53:8–12.

³⁴Matt. 12:38–40; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34; John 2:18–22.

³⁵John 19:34–35.

endured three days without food, water, or medical attention in a cold tomb carved out of rock. In summary, Jesus died.

4) Jesus was buried in a tomb that was easy to find. Some seven hundred years before Jesus was even born, God promised through Isaiah that Jesus would be assigned a grave “with a rich man in his death.”³⁶ This was incredibly unlikely, because Jesus was a very poor man who could not have afforded an expensive burial plot. Following Jesus’ death, though, a wealthy and well-known man named Joseph of Arimathea gifted his expensive tomb for the burial of Jesus.³⁷ As a result, the place of Jesus’ burial was easy to confirm. Joseph who owned the tomb, governmental leaders and their soldiers who were assigned to guard the tomb, and the disciples and women who visited the tomb and found it empty all knew exactly where Jesus’ dead body was laid to rest. Had Jesus truly not risen from death, it would have been very easy to prove it by opening the tomb and presenting Jesus’ dead body as evidence.

5) Jesus appeared physically, not just spiritually, alive three days after his death. Following Jesus’ resurrection, many people touched his physical body: his disciples clung to his feet,³⁸ Mary clung to him,³⁹ and Thomas the doubter put his hand into the open spear hole in Jesus’ side.⁴⁰ Jesus also appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, but they were uncertain if he had truly physically risen from death. Still, Jesus was emphatic about his bodily resurrection and went out of his way to prove it:

As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.⁴¹

³⁶Isa. 53:9.

³⁷Matt. 27:57–60.

³⁸Matt. 28:9.

³⁹John 20:17.

⁴⁰John 20:20–28.

⁴¹Luke 24:36–43.

Furthermore, Jesus appeared physically alive over the course of forty days⁴² to crowds as large as five hundred people at a time.⁴³ It is also significant to note that no credible historical evidence from that period exists to validate any alternative explanation for Jesus' resurrection other than his literal bodily resurrection.⁴⁴

6) Jesus' resurrected body was the same as his pre-resurrection body. His disciples recognized him as the same person who had been crucified,⁴⁵ and Mary Magdalene recognized him by the sound of his voice.⁴⁶ While Jesus' resurrection body was the same, it was transformed. This explains why Jesus was not always immediately recognized after his resurrection,⁴⁷ and seemed to appear and reappear mysteriously.⁴⁸ As James Orr noted, "[In] the narratives . . . it is implied that there was something strange—something unfamiliar or mysterious—in His aspect, which prevented His immediate recognition . . . which held them in awe."⁴⁹ Paul explains this phenomenon in the lengthiest treatment of the nature of a resurrection body in all of Scripture (1 Corinthians 15): "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."⁵⁰ This "spiritual body" refers to a resurrected body that has been perfected to its glorious state by the power of the Holy Spirit.

7) Jesus' resurrection was recorded as Scripture shortly after it occurred. Mark's Gospel account of the days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion mentions the high priest without naming him.⁵¹ It can logically be inferred that Mark did not mention the high priest by name because he expected his readers to know who he was speaking of. Since Caiaphas was high priest from AD 18–37, the latest possible date for the tradition is AD 37.⁵² This date is so close to the death of Jesus that there would not have

⁴²Acts 1:3.

⁴³1 Cor. 15:6.

⁴⁴See Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?"

⁴⁵Luke 24:31; cf. John 21:7, 12.

⁴⁶John 20:16.

⁴⁷John 20:14, 15; 21:12.

⁴⁸John 20:19; Luke 24:31, 36.

⁴⁹James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), 198.

⁵⁰1 Cor. 15:44.

⁵¹Mark 14:53, 54, 60, 61, 63.

⁵²J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 172.

been sufficient time for a “legend” of his resurrection to have developed. This proves that the biblical record of Jesus’ resurrection was penned while the eyewitnesses were still alive to verify the facts. Thus, his resurrection is not a mythical legend that developed long after the time of Jesus. In fact, John Rodgers, former dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, says, “This is the sort of data that historians of antiquity drool over.”⁵³

8) Jesus’ resurrection was celebrated in the earliest church creeds. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul says, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” This statement is widely accepted as the earliest church creed, which began circulating as early as AD 30–36, shortly after Jesus’ resurrection. Considering the early age of this creed, there was not sufficient time between the crucifixion and the creed for any legend about Jesus’ resurrection to accrue. In addition, the witnesses mentioned were still alive and available to be questioned about the facts surrounding the resurrection. The early date of this creed also proves that the church did not corrupt the truth about Jesus with fables and folklores. Rather, the early church simply clung to the plain and incontrovertible facts of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

9) Jesus’ resurrection convinced his family to worship him as God. James, Jesus’ half-brother, was originally opposed to the claims of deity by his brother.⁵⁴ A transformation occurred in James, though, after he saw his brother resurrected from death.⁵⁵ James went on to pastor the church in Jerusalem and authored the New Testament epistle bearing his name.⁵⁶ He was also actively involved in shaping the early church, which suffered and died to proclaim to everyone that Jesus is the one true God.⁵⁷ Also, Jesus’ mother Mary was part of the early church that prayed to and worshiped her son as God,⁵⁸ as was Jesus’ other brother Jude, who wrote a book of the

⁵³Quoted in Richard N. Ostling, “Who Was Jesus?” *Time*, August 15, 1988, 41.

⁵⁴John 7:5.

⁵⁵1 Cor. 15:7.

⁵⁶James 1:1.

⁵⁷Acts 12:17; 15:12–21; 21:18; Gal. 2:9.

⁵⁸Acts 1:14.

New Testament bearing his name.⁵⁹ While it is not impossible to imagine Jesus convincing some people that he was God if he were not, it is impossible to conceive of Jesus convincing his own mother and brothers to suffer persecution in this life and risk the torments of hell in eternal life for worshipping him as the one true God unless he truly was.

10) Jesus' resurrection was confirmed by his most bitter enemies, such as Paul. Paul was a devout Jewish Pharisee who routinely persecuted and killed Christians.⁶⁰ After an encounter with the risen Christ, Paul was converted and became the most dynamic defender and expander of the church.⁶¹ Had Jesus not truly risen from death, it is absurd to assume that Paul would ever have worshiped him as God, particularly when Paul rightly believed that worshipping a false God would send one into the eternal flames of hell. Simply, Paul hated Jesus and would never have changed his religious practice unless Jesus had risen from death to prove him wrong. Furthermore, Paul insisted that Jesus had risen in almost all of his letters that are saved for us in the New Testament.

WHAT IS THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE FOR JESUS' RESURRECTION?

Effects have causes. Jesus' resurrection is no exception, as is evident by eight effects caused by it. Together, they are compelling circumstantial evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Further, for those wanting to deny Jesus' resurrection, the burden of proof remains on them to account for these multiple effects with a reasonable cause. Craig explains, "Anyone who denies this explanation is rationally obligated to produce a more plausible cause of Jesus' resurrection and to explain how it happened."⁶² He goes on to assert, "The conclusion that God raised Him up is virtually inescapable. Only a sterile, academic skepticism resists this inevitable inference."⁶³

⁵⁹Acts 1:14; Jude 1.

⁶⁰Phil. 3:4-6; Acts 7:54-60.

⁶¹Acts 9.

⁶²William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 134.

⁶³Ibid.

1) Jesus' disciples were transformed. Prior to the resurrection, his disciples were timid and fearful, even hiding when Jesus appeared to them.⁶⁴ Following the resurrection, however, they were all transformed into bold witnesses to what they had seen and heard, even to the point of dying in shame and poverty for their convictions, including Peter.

Regarding the apostles' eyewitness testimony to Jesus' resurrection, Simon Greenleaf, professor of law at Harvard University and a world-renowned scholar on the rules of legal evidence, said that it was "impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact."⁶⁵

2) Jesus' disciples remained loyal to Jesus as their victorious Messiah. Modern-day "messiahs" include, for example, politicians who propose to save and deliver us from a terrible fate such as terrorism, poverty, or unreasonable taxation. Supporters flock around their messiah in hopes that he will deliver on his promise to make their dreams come true. However, when a messiah fails to deliver as promised, his followers either abandon both the cause and the messiah, or they retain the cause and abandon the messiah to instead pursue another messiah. Either way, a failed messiah is a forgotten messiah.

However, Jesus' disciples did not abandon their cause of forgiven sin and life with God or their devotion to Jesus as their victorious Messiah. Furthermore, their devotion to both their cause and Messiah grew in numbers and passionate devotion. They endured widespread persecution and even martyrdom, which would have been unthinkable had Jesus merely died and failed to rise as he promised he would. On this point, the historian Kenneth Scott Latourette has said:

It was the conviction of the resurrection of Jesus which lifted his followers out of the despair into which his death had cast them and which led to the perpetuation of the movement begun by him. But for their

⁶⁴John 20:19.

⁶⁵Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists: The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), 32.

profound belief that the crucified had risen from the dead and that they had seen him and talked with him, the death of Jesus and even Jesus himself would probably have been all but forgotten.⁶⁶

3) The disciples had exemplary character. To claim that the disciples preached obvious lies and deluded people into dying for the world's greatest farce, one would have to first find credible evidence to challenge the character of the disciples. Also, these men were devout Jews who knew that if they worshiped a false god and encouraged others to do the same, they would be sentenced by God to the fires of eternal hell for violating the first two commandments. Lastly, does not such egregious lying conflict with the character of men and women who gave their lives to feeding the poor, caring for widows and orphans, and helping the hurting and needy?

4) Worship changed. The early church stopped worshipping on Saturday, as Jews had for thousands of years, and suddenly began worshipping on Sunday in memory of Jesus' Sunday resurrection.⁶⁷ The Sabbath was so sacred to the Jews that they would not have ceased to obey one of the Ten Commandments unless Jesus had resurrected in fulfillment of their Old Testament Scriptures. Yet, by the end of the first century, Sunday was called "the Lord's Day."⁶⁸

Not only did the day of worship change after the resurrection of Jesus, but so did the object of worship. Considering that one of the Ten Commandments also forbids the worship of false gods, it is impossible to conceive of devout Jews simply worshipping Jesus as the one true God without the proof of Jesus' resurrection.

According to even non-Christian historians, multitudes began worshipping Jesus as the one true God after his resurrection. For example, Lucian of Samosata was a non-Christian Assyrian-Roman satirist who, around AD 170, wrote:

⁶⁶Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols., *The First Five Centuries* (New York: Harper, 1937), 1:59.

⁶⁷Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2.

⁶⁸Rev. 1:10.

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains their contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.⁶⁹

Additionally, the early church rejected the observances of the law because they saw it as having been fulfilled in Jesus; thus, the law was no longer binding upon them in the same way as it had been for over a thousand years. This was a cataclysmic shift in belief that was only considered possible because a new epoch had been ushered in by the resurrection of Jesus.

Lastly, God's people welcomed the sacraments of Communion and baptism into their worship of Jesus as God. In Communion the early Christians remembered Jesus' death in their place for their sins. In baptism they remembered Jesus' resurrection in their place for their salvation and anticipated their personal future resurrection.

5) Women discovered the empty tomb. The women who discovered the tomb were mentioned by name, were well known in the early church, and could have easily been questioned to confirm their findings if they were untrue.⁷⁰ Moreover, since the testimony of women was not respected in that culture, it would have been more likely for men to report discovering the empty tomb if the account was fictitious and an attempt were being made to concoct a credible lie about Jesus' resurrection. Therefore, the fact that women are said to have been the first to arrive at Jesus' empty tomb is confirmation that the account of Scripture is factual, not contrived.

⁶⁹Lucian, "The Death of Peregrine," in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), 11–13. Also see Pliny, *Letters*, trans. William Melmoth, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 10.96.

⁷⁰Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1.

6) The entirety of early church preaching was centered on the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection. If the empty tomb were not a widely accepted fact, the disciples would have reasoned with the skeptics of their day to defend the central issue of their faith. Instead, we see the debate occurring not about whether the tomb was empty, but why it was empty.⁷¹ Also, nowhere in the preaching of the early church was the empty tomb explicitly defended, for the simple reason that it was widely known as an agreed-upon fact. Furthermore, a reading of the book of Acts shows that on virtually every occasion that preaching and teaching occurred, the resurrection of Jesus from death was the central truth being communicated because it had changed human history and could not be ignored. Jesus' resurrection appears in twelve of the twenty-eight chapters in Acts, which records the history of the early church.

7) Jesus' tomb was not enshrined. Craig says, "It was customary in Judaism for the tomb of a prophet or holy man to be preserved or venerated as a shrine. This was so because the bones of the prophet lay in the tomb and imparted to the site its religious values. If the remains were not there, then the grave would lose its significance as a shrine."⁷²

Of the four major world religions based upon a founder as opposed to a system of ideas, only Christianity claims that the tomb of its founder is empty. Judaism looks back to Abraham, who died almost four thousand years ago, and still cares for his grave as a holy site at Hebron. Thousands visit Buddha's tomb in India every year. Islam founder Mohammed died on June 8, 632, and his tomb in Medina is visited by millions of people every year.

Additionally, Yamauchi has discovered evidence that the tombs of at least fifty prophets or other religious figures were enshrined as places of worship and veneration in Palestine around the same time as Jesus' death.⁷³ Yet, according to James D. G. Dunn, there is "absolutely no trace" of any

⁷¹Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 40.

⁷²Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" 152.

⁷³Yamauchi, "Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?" 4-7.

vation at Jesus' tomb.⁷⁴ The obvious reason for this lack of veneration is that Jesus was not buried but instead resurrected.

8) Christianity exploded on the earth and a few billion people today claim to be Christians. On the same day, in the same place, and in the same way, two other men died, one on Jesus' left and one on his right. Despite the similarities, we do not know the names of these men, and billions of people do not worship them as God. Why? Because they remained dead and Jesus alone rose from death and ascended into heaven, leaving the Christian church in his wake. On this point, C. F. D. Moule of Cambridge University says, "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."⁷⁵

WHAT IS THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR JESUS' RESURRECTION?

Because Jesus' death is a historical fact, the corroborating evidence of non-Christian sources in addition to the Bible helps to confirm the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The following testimony of Romans, Greeks, and Jews is helpful because these men are simply telling the facts without any religious devotion to them.

Josephus (AD 37–100)

Josephus was a Jewish historian born just a few years after Jesus died. His most celebrated passage, called the "Testimonium Flavianum," says:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at

⁷⁴James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 67–68.

⁷⁵C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 13, emphasis in original.

the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for *he appeared to them alive again the third day*, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁷⁶

Suetonius (AD 70–160)

Suetonius was a Roman historian and annalist of the Imperial House. In his biography of Nero (Nero ruled AD 54–68), Suetonius mentions the persecution of Christians by indirectly referring to the resurrection: “Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to *a new and mischievous superstition* [the resurrection].”⁷⁷

Pliny the Younger (AD 61 or 62–113)

Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan around AD 111 describing early Christian worship gatherings that met early on Sunday mornings in memory of Jesus’ resurrection day:

I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. . . . They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly *before dawn on a fixed day* [Sunday in remembrance of Jesus’ resurrection] to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god.⁷⁸

The Jewish Explanation

The earliest attempt to provide an alternative explanation for the resurrection of Jesus did not deny that the tomb was empty.⁷⁹ Instead, Jewish

⁷⁶Flavius Josephus, “Jewish Antiquities,” in *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 18.63–64, emphasis added.

⁷⁷Suetonius, *Vita Nero* 16.11–13.

⁷⁸Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96.1–7.

⁷⁹Matt. 28:13–15.

opponents claimed that the body had been stolen, thus admitting the fact of the empty tomb. But this explanation is untenable for the following reasons. (1) The tomb was closed with an enormous rock and sealed by the government, and there is no explanation for how the rock was moved while being guarded by armed Roman soldiers. (2) If the body had been stolen, a large ransom could have been offered to the thieves, and they could have been coerced to produce the body. Or if it had been taken by the disciples, then the torture and death they suffered should have been sufficient to return the body. (3) Even if the body was stolen, how are we to account for the fact that Jesus appeared to multiple crowds of people, proving that he was alive? In conclusion, the theft of the body is unlikely and still fails to account for it returning back to life.

Summarily, the historical testimony of those who were not Christians stands in agreement with Scripture that Jesus died and rose because those are the historical facts.

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY ANCIENT OBJECTIONS TO JESUS' RESURRECTION?

Jesus did not die on the cross but merely swooned. Some have argued that Jesus did not in fact die on the cross but rather swooned or basically passed out and therefore appeared dead. This is also what the Muslim Koran teaches as fact. Regarding this claim, theologian John Stott has asked if we are to believe

that after the rigours and pains of trial, mockery, flogging and crucifixion he could survive thirty-six hours in a stone sepulchre with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That he could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb, and this without disturbing the Roman guard? That then, weak and sickly and hungry, he could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that he had vanquished death? That he could go on to claim that he had died and risen, could send them into all the world and promise to be with them unto the end of time? That he could live somewhere in hiding for forty days, making occasional sur-

prise appearances, and then finally disappear without explanations? Such credulity is more incredible than Thomas' unbelief.⁸⁰

Also, as we've noted, crucifixion is essentially death by asphyxiation, because the prisoner grows too tired to lift himself up and fill his lungs with air. This explains why the Romans would often break a prisoner's legs, thus preventing him from continuing to fill his lungs with air. Since the professional executioners did not break Jesus' legs, these professional executioners must have been convinced of his death. The only way Jesus could have deceived the executioners would have been to stop breathing, which in itself would have killed him.

Lastly, John 19:34–35 tells us that the Roman soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' heart to confirm his death. The water that poured out was probably from the sac surrounding his heart, and the blood most likely came from the right side of his heart. Even if he had been alive, this would have killed him.⁸¹

Jesus did not rise and his body was stolen. The original explanation given for the empty tomb by those Jews who did not choose to worship Jesus as God was that the tomb was indeed empty, but not because of a resurrection but because of a theft of Jesus' dead body.⁸² For this to be true, a number of impossibilities would have had to occur. (1) Despite the fact that it would have cost them their lives, all the guards positioned at the tomb would have had to fall asleep at the same time. (2) Each of the guards would have had to not only fall asleep but also remain asleep and not be awakened by the breaking of the Roman seal on the tomb, the rolling away of the enormous stone which blocked the entrance, or the carrying off of the dead body. (3) Even if Jesus' body was stolen, there is no way to account for its returning to vibrant and triumphant life.

The issue of motive is also a key factor in refuting this hypothesis. What benefit would there be for the disciples to risk their lives to steal a corpse and die for a lie as a result? What motive would there be for the

⁸⁰John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 1971), 49.

⁸¹C. Truman Davis, "The Crucifixion of Jesus: The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View," *Arizona Medicine* (March 1965): 183–87.

⁸²Matt. 28:11–15.

Jews, Romans, or anyone else to steal the body? And, if the body were truly stolen, could not a bounty have been offered and someone enticed to provide the body in exchange for a handsome cash reward?

A twin brother, or a look-alike, died in Jesus' place. It has been suggested by some Muslim scholars along with various other people that Jesus was not the one crucified but rather a brother or other man who looked like him. However, there is not a shred of evidence to prove that someone who looked like Jesus existed at that time. Additionally, Jesus' mother was present at his crucifixion, and the likelihood of fooling his mother is minimal. Also, the physical wounds he suffered during the crucifixion were visible on Jesus' resurrection body and carefully inspected by the disciple Thomas, who was very doubtful that Jesus had risen until he touched scars from the crucifixion evident on Jesus' body.⁸³ In addition, the tomb was empty and the burial cloths were left behind.

Jesus' followers hallucinated his resurrection. Some people have suggested that the disciples did not actually see Jesus risen from death but rather hallucinated, or projected, their desires for his resurrection into a hallucination. One example is John Dominic Crossan, cochairman of the Jesus Seminar. He told *Time* magazine that after the crucifixion, Jesus' corpse was probably laid in a shallow grave, barely covered with dirt, and eaten by wild dogs. The subsequent story of Jesus' resurrection, he says, was merely the result of "wishful thinking."⁸⁴

Similarly, fellow Jesus Seminar member John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal bishop, denies the resurrection and believes Jesus' body was thrown in a common grave along with other crucifixion victims. Subsequently, he says the "Easter moment" happened to Peter, not to Jesus. Peter saw Jesus alive in "the heart of God" and began to open the eyes of the other disciples to this reality.⁸⁵ Spong writes, "That was the dawn of Easter in human history. It would be fair to say that in that moment *Simon felt resurrected*."⁸⁶

⁸³John 20:24–28.

⁸⁴Richard N. Ostling, "Jesus Christ, Plain and Simple," *Time*, January 10, 1994, 32–33.

⁸⁵John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 143.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 255, emphasis added.

This thesis is unbelievable for five reasons. (1) A hallucination is a private, not public, experience. Yet Paul clearly states that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people at one time.⁸⁷ (2) Jesus appeared in a variety of times at a variety of locations, whereas hallucinations are generally restricted to individual times and places. (3) Certain types of people tend to be more prone to hallucination than others. Yet Jesus appeared to a great variety of personalities, including his brothers and mother. (4) After forty days Jesus' appearances suddenly stopped for everyone simultaneously. Hallucinations tend to continue over longer periods of time and do not stop abruptly. (5) A hallucination is a projection of a thought that preexists in the mind. However, the Jews had a conception of resurrection that applied to the raising of all people at the end of history,⁸⁸ not the raising of any particular individual in the middle of history.⁸⁹ Therefore, it is inconceivable that the witnesses to the resurrection could have hallucinated Jesus' resurrection.

In considering the objections to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, C. S. Lewis's charge of "chronological snobbery" begins to make sense.⁹⁰ Each of the objections is predicated upon the assumption that people in Jesus' day were less intelligent and more gullible than we are today. However, it can be argued persuasively that in their world with fewer hospitals, medicines, and hospices to care for dying people, they were more personally aware of the finality of death than we moderns are. Additionally, as we have already surveyed, they did not even believe in resurrection, and because of the influence of Greek dualism upon them, which considered the body an unwanted husk to be discarded so the soul could truly live, the entire idea of resurrection was undesirable. Taken together, it is apparent that such chronological snobbery reveals more about the character of those moderns who appeal to it than those ancients who are dismissed by it.

⁸⁷1 Cor. 15:1–6.

⁸⁸E.g., Dan. 12:2.

⁸⁹See Craig, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?" 159–60.

⁹⁰C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 201.

WHAT HAS THE RESURRECTION ACCOMPLISHED FOR CHRISTIANS?

Jesus' resurrection reveals him as our messiah king. In the Davidic covenant,⁹¹ God the Father promised that his Son, Jesus Christ, would be raised up from David's lineage to rule over an everlasting kingdom. Paul reveals that this was fulfilled at the resurrection of Jesus: "Concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord."⁹² Now that the risen Christ has been installed as our messiah king, we can rest assured that one day Jesus will return to establish his throne on the earth and rule over his kingdom, which extends to all of creation.

Furthermore, following Jesus' resurrection, an angel declared, "He is not here, for he has risen, as he said."⁹³ Therefore, the resurrection is proof that Jesus' teaching was and is truth that we can trust. Practically, Jesus' resurrection gives us confidence in his other promises that we are waiting to see fulfilled, such as his returning one day to judge sinners⁹⁴ and reward saints.⁹⁵

The Bible often speaks of our being united with Christ by his resurrection,⁹⁶ being raised with Christ,⁹⁷ and enjoying the same powerful Holy Spirit that raised Christ.⁹⁸ In so doing, the Bible is stressing the innumerable blessings and benefits conferred on believers because of Jesus' resurrection.

Paul stresses the fact that through Jesus' death and resurrection we have forgiveness of sins.⁹⁹ Because of Jesus, those with faith in him can live with the great joy of knowing that all their sins—past, present, and future—have been forgiven once and for all by Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as the power of Jesus' resurrection works itself out in our sanctification, we grow in holiness, learning to live in victory over sin, until one day upon our own resurrection

⁹¹2 Sam. 7:7–16.

⁹²Rom. 1:3–4.

⁹³Matt. 28:6.

⁹⁴John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:25–29.

⁹⁵John 14:3.

⁹⁶Rom. 6:5.

⁹⁷Col. 2:12; 3:1.

⁹⁸1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 5:15.

⁹⁹1 Cor. 15:3–58.

we will live forever, free from the presence, power, and practice of all sin. Elsewhere, Jesus' resurrection is spoken of as the source of our justification, thereby enabling us, though sinners, to be declared righteous in the sight of God. Paul explicitly states that Jesus was "raised for our justification."¹⁰⁰

Regarding our future, Jesus' resurrection is the precedent and pattern of our own: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."¹⁰¹ As his body was resurrected in complete health, so too will we rise and never experience pain, injury, or death ever again. This is because through the resurrection, Jesus has put death to death.

Additionally, Wright makes the insightful observation that "the message of the resurrection is that this present world matters."¹⁰² Because Jesus rose from death physically, we learn that God through Christ intends to reclaim and restore all that he made in creation and saw corrupted through the fall. Our eternity will be spent in a world much like the one enjoyed by our first parents in Eden, because the earth has been reclaimed and restored by God through Jesus' resurrection.

The full effects of Jesus' resurrection will be seen one day, following Jesus' return. The time between Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection is a lengthy season of love, grace, and mercy as news of the gospel goes forth, inviting sinners to repent of sin and enjoy the present and future salvation of Jesus Christ. Paul preached just this fact and the urgent need for sinners to repent: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."¹⁰³

In closing, no one can remain neutral regarding Jesus' resurrection. The claim is too staggering, the event is too earthshaking, the implications are too significant, and the matter is too serious. We must each either receive or reject it as truth for us, and to remain indifferent or undecided is to reject it.

¹⁰⁰Rom. 4:25.

¹⁰¹1 Cor. 15:20.

¹⁰²N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 65.

¹⁰³Acts 17:30–31.