DID JESUS REALLY RISE FROM THE DEAD?

In the last chapter it was mentioned that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the primary proof to show that Jesus is the Son of God. In this chapter we will consider further the importance of the resurrection and evidence to support it.

The Importance of the Resurrection

Jesus himself pointed to his resurrection as a sign that would back up the authority he claimed for himself as the Son of God. On one occasion, after Jesus drove the money changers from the temple, the Jews asked him, “What are you doing? If God gave you authority to do this, show us a miraculous sign to prove it” (John 2:18). Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Jesus was not referring to the temple building, as they thought, but to his body (as the dwelling place of God). He was saying that if they killed him, he would raise himself up again in three days. John writes, “After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered he said this, and they believed both the Scriptures and what Jesus had said” (John 2:22).

After Jesus rose again, his disciples emphasized this as the main reason the Jews should change their minds about Jesus and believe in him. Peter said to the Jews in his sermon at Pentecost:

People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip (Acts 2:22-24).

The Jews should have believed in Jesus even before he died because of the miracles he did, which they had seen for themselves. But still they did not believe and had him put to death, with the help of the Romans. So why should they now change their minds and believe in him? Peter says, “You nailed him to a cross . . . but God . . . raised him back to life,” and added “God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this” (Acts 2:32). Then he concluded by saying, “So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36)! When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said, “Brothers, what should we do” (verse 37)? Peter said, “Each one of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). About 3,000 people responded to his message and were baptized that day (Acts 2:41). What was it that caused them to change their minds about Jesus? It was the fact that he had risen from the dead. That was the primary proof that convinced them.

The Apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of Jesus’ resurrection when he said, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Most of the early believers became followers of Christ because they heard that Jesus rose again. If he did not rise again, then their reason for believing was invalid and the foundation for their faith crumbles. Paul also said that to be saved from sin one must believe in the resurrection, for he wrote: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Evidence for the Resurrection

Eyewitness Testimony

The first evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is eyewitness testimony. How do we know that any event in history happened? It is because there were eyewitnesses who saw the event, and based on their testimony the event was recorded and passed down to us. So it is with the resurrection. We have four separate historical accounts (the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), all based on eyewitness testimony, which relate an account of the resurrection of Jesus. These can be read in Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-14, Luke 24:1-49, and John 20:1-29. The fact that there are four separate accounts which agree on the basic facts further strengthens the historical evidence. Based on these eyewitness accounts we know that there were many people on several different occasions who saw Jesus in bodily form after he had risen from the dead. The Apostle Paul gives this summary of those who saw Jesus after he had risen:

He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him (1 Corinthians 15:4-8).

We know that Jesus rose again because many reliable witnesses saw him after he came back to life.

The Empty Tomb

Another evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is the empty tomb. All one had to do to disprove the resurrection of Jesus was to find his body. But no one could find the body of Jesus, for the tomb was empty. When the women went to look at the tomb on the third day after his death, there was an angel there who said: “I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying” (Matthew 28:5-6).

Of course now it is many years after the resurrection, and it may be difficult to prove the correct location for Jesus’ burial. But at the time there was no doubt, for the Roman soldiers were sent to guard the tomb. When stories were going around about Jesus coming back to life, all the Jewish leaders or Romans had to do to stop the stories was to go to the tomb and find the body. But this they could not do, for the tomb was empty.

Jesus was unique among the great religious leaders in that only he rose from the dead. You can visit the places where many great men have been buried, but for Jesus you can only visit an empty tomb. As G. B. Hardy says, “Here is the complete record: Confucius’ tomb—occupied; Buddha’s tomb—occupied; Muhammad’s tomb—occupied; Jesus’ tomb—empty.”1

The Explosive Growth of the Early Church

The explosive growth of the early church is also strong evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus died, he had only a few faithful followers, and even they had deserted him and fled. Judas, one of the Twelve, had betrayed him, and Peter, their leader, had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. After Jesus’ death, his disciples were discouraged and disappointed. They had hoped Jesus was the Messiah—the one to bring God’s kingdom to Israel, but instead he was rejected and killed. They felt their hopes had been dashed and that their experiment of following Jesus had been a failure, for they still did not really understand the purpose of Jesus’ death in God’s plan. The last thing they wanted to do was to go out and start a new religion. They just wanted to hide together in a room and figure out how to go on with their lives.

But just a couple of months later, these same men were out on the streets, openly and boldly telling everyone about Jesus, and thousands were becoming his followers (Acts 2:41; 4:4). What made the difference? It was the resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus rose again their faith was renewed and their enthusiasm could not be contained. They were so committed to spreading the news of Jesus and his resurrection that most of them were willing to die as martyrs for the cause. The change in the lives of the disciples which led to the amazing growth of the church was so remarkable that John W. Stott says, “Perhaps the transformation of the disciples of Jesus is the greatest evidence of all for the resurrection . . .” 2

The Experience of Christ’s Followers

Another evidence to support the resurrection of Jesus is the change in millions of lives since that time until now. Those who are true followers of Jesus know that he is alive because he lives in their hearts through the Holy Spirit. One well-known Christian hymn says, “You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.”3 For the follower of Jesus, he is not just a historical person to read about, or a great teacher to learn from, or a great man to imitate—he is a living Person to have a relationship with.

Inadequate Alternatives

We have considered several evidences for the resurrection of Jesus. Yet some would surely say there must be some other explanation for what happened. Various alternatives have been proposed.

The Hallucination Theory

According to this theory, some people thought they saw Jesus after he died, but actually he was not there—it was only a hallucination. Perhaps some of Jesus’ followers so badly wished that they could see him that they imagined they did. If only one or two people saw Jesus, then this theory might be plausible. However, numerous people saw him on many different occasions. His eleven remaining disciples all saw him several different times, and on one occasion 500 people saw him at the same time (1 Corinthians 15:6). It is impossible that all these people could have the same hallucination at the same time, or that his disciples on multiple occasions would all have the same hallucination at the same time.

The Hoax Theory

According to this theory, the resurrection story was a cleverly devised hoax. The disciples stole the body and then started to spread the false story that he had risen from the dead. But there are at least two problems with this theory.

First, it would have been very difficult for the disciples to steal the body because the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers. The Jewish leaders were afraid of this very thing and took steps to prevent it. Matthew’s account says:

The next day, on the Sabbath, the leading priests and Pharisees went to see Pilate. They told him, “Sir, we remember what that deceiver once said while he was still alive: ‘After three days I will rise from the dead.’ So we request that you seal the tomb until the third day. This will prevent his disciples from coming and stealing the body and then telling everyone he was raised from the dead! If that happens, we’ll be worse off than we were at first.” Pilate replied, “Take guards and secure it the best you can.” So they sealed the tomb and posted guards to protect it (Matthew 27:62-66).

Second, even if the disciples could somehow steal the body, such as by bribing the soldiers, it is unlikely that they would be willing to die for Jesus if they knew the resurrection story was a lie. All of the eleven remaining disciples eventually died as martyrs for their faith except John, and he also was persecuted by being exiled to the island of Patmos. This shows that they sincerely believed that what they preached about Jesus was true, for it is hard to imagine a person dying for what he knows to be a lie. When Jesus died, the disciples were discouraged. Could they have been changed into such bold, courageous men who were willing to die for the message they preached just by devising a clever plan to steal the body?

The Swoon Theory

According to this theory, Jesus did not actually die—he only fainted (swooned), and then later revived in the tomb and came out. There are also several problems with this theory.

First, it is clear that Jesus died. When Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers were going to break his legs to make him die sooner. (When a person was crucified, he would push up on his legs to get a breath. When the legs were broken, he could no longer do that and would suffocate to death.) But the Bible says, “But when they came to Jesus, *they saw that he was already dead*, so they didn’t break his legs” (John 19:33, italics added). The soldiers had crucified many people before, and they could tell when a person was dead. According to their expert opinion, he was already dead.

Second, even if the soldiers were somehow mistaken, it would have been noticed if he was alive during the burial process. Jesus was buried by a sympathizer, Joseph of Arimathea, who asked Pilate for permission to take down the body for burial (John 19:38). It took some time to wrap his body in strips of linen with spices, according to the Jewish custom (John 19:39). Certainly if he saw any sign of life he would not have buried Jesus. But he did bury Jesus, so according to his opinion also, Jesus was dead.

Third, even if Jesus somehow was buried in the tomb alive, how would he have had enough strength, in his severely weakened condition, to unwrap himself from the burial cloths and to push away the very large stone which sealed the entrance of the tomb? Furthermore, if he did get out the guards would catch him. For these various reasons, the swoon theory is not plausible.\*

The Ghost Theory

According to this theory, Jesus did not come back to life in bodily form, but only his spirit or ghost appeared to people on several occasions. In fact, this was what his disciples first thought, for the Bible says that when he suddenly appeared to them, “The whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!” (Luke 24:37). But Jesus said, “Why are you frightened? Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it’s really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that I do” (Luke 24:39). Then he also ate a piece of fish in their presence, further showing that he was not a ghost.

Conclusion

We have considered the evidence for the resurrection—the eyewitness testimony, the empty tomb, the explosive growth of the early church, and the experience of Christ’s followers who know that Jesus is alive in their hearts. We have also examined the inadequate alternatives—the hallucination theory, the hoax theory, the swoon theory, and the ghost theory. It is time for you to consider the evidence and come to a conclusion. You may say, “It’s too incredible, I just can’t believe it.” But by what logic can you dismiss it, for none of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\* As it was, when Jesus came back to life he had a body of a new quality (an immortal or glorified body) which was capable of passing through walls or of suddenly appearing or disappearing (see Luke 24:31,36). So he was able to leave the tomb without rolling the stone away or going through the entrance, and was therefore not caught by the guards. Only later, when an earthquake caused the stone to move away could others see that the tomb was empty.

The ghost theory also does not explain the empty tomb. If the appearances of Jesus were just ghost, then his body would have still been in the tomb.

alternative explanations is plausible upon careful examination. You may say, “It’s too confusing, I just won’t think about it.” But the issue is too important to ignore. The resurrection is the primary proof that Jesus is the Son of God. And if he is the Son of God, you should believe in and follow him.

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Josh McDowell, Evidence That Demands a Verdict, p. 270.
2. Quoted in McDowell, p. 236.
3. Alfred H. Ackley, “He Lives,” #132 in Great Hymns of the Faith, compiled and edited by John W. Peterson, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Music, 1981.