

Did Jesus Christ Rise From the Dead?

This is surely one of the most important questions anyone could ask. If it is true, then the resurrection of Christ has significant implications for each of us, not only in regard to the next life, but for this life as well.

If it is not true, then the whole Christian faith is false. As the apostle Paul wrote to fellow believers: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19).

It may surprise you to know that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ is overwhelming. It has often been said that the resurrection is the best attested fact in history. Consider the following comments:

I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead – Thomas Arnold.

As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling ... The Gospel evidence for the resurrection ... I accept unreservedly as the testimony of truthful people to facts they were able to substantiate – Sir Edward Clarke K.C.

Taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no single historical incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection – B. F. Westcott.

This paper presents the key evidence for the resurrection of Christ.

Evidence for the Resurrection

Bible Prophecy

Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days (Acts 3:24).

The Bible contains literally hundreds of prophecies pertaining to Christ. Most of these were made many centuries before they were fulfilled. The following examples show that the resurrection of Christ was fundamental to God’s plan of salvation for all those who put their hope in him.

When the apostle Peter addressed a crowd in Jerusalem shortly after the crucifixion of Christ, he pointed to a prophecy by David, a former king of Israel, as evidence that God had raised Christ from the dead: “Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay” (Acts 2:31). David lived around 1000 BC.

The writer of the book of Hebrews also draws attention to another of David’s prophecies where he declared, on behalf of God, that Christ would be “a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:17). For him to be a priest forever would clearly require him to be raised from the dead. Hence, the writer of Hebrews concludes, “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood” (Hebrews 7:23-24).

In the sixth century BC, the prophet Isaiah predicted, in astonishing detail, the role that Christ would play in his earthly ministry (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). The prophecy also refers directly to

his resurrection from death: “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul; he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:10-11).

In the eighth century BC, Hosea described the suffering of the people of Israel in terms that foreshadowed the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ: “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence” (Hosea 6:1-2).

Jesus also prophesied his own death and resurrection on at least twelve different occasions. These were not vague references that might have been anticipated from the circumstances, but detailed accounts of what would happen: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matthew 16:21).

On another occasion Jesus pointed to the experience of Jonah as a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Jonah preached to the Assyrian city of Nineveh which lasted until the seventh century BC.

On the basis of the many fulfilled prophecies pertaining to Christ, one Jewish scholar became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah:

The chances of all these prophecies being fulfilled in one man are so overwhelmingly remote that it is strikingly demonstrated that they could in no wise be the shrewd guesses of mere men – Prof. J. P. Free.

Eyewitness Accounts

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples at various times over a period of forty days before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:1-11). According to Paul, Jesus appeared not only to the twelve apostles, but on one occasion to more than five hundred of his disciples at the same time, and then lastly to Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). But can we trust these accounts?

Sceptics usually argue that the writings which make up the New Testament are exaggerated accounts of actually events. Any serious and honest examination of these writings, however, reveals them to be authentic and reliable eyewitness reports.

For one thing, they are unashamedly honest. It is contrary to imperfect human nature to admit mistakes or failures, especially in writing. Most ancient writers reported only their successes and virtues. Yet the New Testament writers reported that the apostles at times showed little faith, sought prominence, and even abandoned Jesus at his arrest. Paul openly acknowledged his former wrongdoings and his struggles with sin. Even disputes among the disciples were reported. If the biblical writers were going to falsify anything, it would have been unfavourable information about themselves. They would not likely reveal their own shortcomings and then make false claims about other things.

Furthermore, falsehood by the New Testament writers would have been contrary to the very teachings of Jesus that the writers were upholding. Jesus often prefaced his teachings with the words, “I tell you the truth”. On one occasion he rebuked the Pharisees for not understanding him, describing them as children of the devil, who “is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:42-47). Jesus also warned the unbelievers that they would be judged according to what they say (Matthew 12:33-37), and that false words make a person unclean (Matthew 15:10-20). His disciples would have taken great care, therefore, to report what they had seen honestly.

There are also numerous minor details in the New Testament writings which give them that unmistakable “ring of truth”. For example, when Mark describes how the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested, he reports that, “A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind” (Mark 14:51-52). It is likely that Mark is here describing himself.

Another remarkable example of this is the prominence given to the testimony of the women in a culture where women were not considered to be proper witnesses in either Jewish or Gentile law. These things were reported simply because that was the way they happened.

Sceptics often point to the numerous minor inconsistencies in the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as evidence that they are unreliable. For example, Matthew records that the criminals crucified with Christ *both* insulted him, while Luke reports that only one of the criminals mocked him and the other sought his forgiveness (Matthew 27:44 and Luke 23:39-43). Clearly, both versions cannot be right.

In reality, however, these minor inconsistencies provide strong evidence that the writings are indeed true and honest eyewitness reports. They demonstrate that there was no collusion by the writers intended to mislead their readers. Each writer has simply observed, or failed to observe, some minor facets of the same events. Nor do these small differences reflect poorly upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, they demonstrate God’s ability to use ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results.

Finally, the internal harmony and consistency of the biblical writings testifies to the impossibility that any part of the Christian doctrine was invented. This harmony occurs not only across the New Testament, but throughout the whole of the Bible. It is simply inconceivable that the disciples, most of whom were unlearned people, could have made up such an elaborate story without somewhere being exposed, especially given the intense scrutiny of the religious scholars of the day.

The total lack of fanciful material, or what is commonly called *myth*, has convinced many literary scholars to accept the New Testament as genuine:

For more than 30 years it was my chief business in life to study and try to teach literature. To anyone earnestly so engaged there naturally comes a certain ability to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, the authentic from the invented. Every time I read the Gospels I am pressed more deeply with the conviction that the narratives concerning Christ do not belong to the realms of fancy, tradition or folklore ... The incidents are such that they could never have been invented; and their effect on the world for 2000 years has been such as no inventions could have produced. These stories possess that patent transparent validity that belongs only to truth – Archibald Rutledge.

Growth of the Christian Church

After the crucifixion of Christ, the large crowds that followed him had melted away, the apostles were hiding behind locked doors for fear of their lives, and his disciples were dispirited and defeated. The one they had hoped was the long awaited Messiah, whose coming had been forecast by all the great Old Testament prophets, who had taught such powerful truths and had demonstrated his authority with many miraculous proofs, was dead.

Of the twelve apostles, Judas had betrayed Jesus and then hanged himself, Peter had denied Jesus, and Thomas still had doubts. James, the brother of Jesus, had always been sceptical. What was it, then, that transformed this tiny band of unschooled, ordinary men and women within a few days of the crucifixion, into the fearless and effective leaders of a new religious movement?

Peter now boldly confronted the crowds and the Pharisees proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah and risen Lord. Thomas was now fully convinced that Jesus was his “Lord

and God” (John 20:28). James also became a believer, and would later become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Mary, who had watched her son die a cruel death on a cross, instead of mourning her loss, was now praying with the disciples and worshipping Jesus.

None of the disciples had expected Jesus to rise from the dead. The Old Testament scriptures supported the idea of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time. But the idea of an individual rising from the dead as a guarantee of a future resurrection, was not part of their world view. Yet it is clear that it was their conviction in a real, physical resurrection of Jesus that had transformed them.

No less impressive is the conversion of Paul. Before his conversion Paul was a zealous Pharisee and merciless persecutor of the early Church. He approved of the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and according to Luke, “began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8:3).

After a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ, Paul at once “began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). Paul would go on to become arguably the greatest Christian missionary of all time. His conviction was such that no amount of hardship could deter him. He was frequently flogged and beaten, once stoned, and three times shipwrecked. He was constantly in danger from the elements, from bandits, from the Gentiles and from the Jews.

Even before the conversion of Paul, the early church grew rapidly with many priests becoming believers (Acts 6:7). According to John, many of the religious leaders believed in Jesus as a result of his teachings and the miracles he performed (John 12:42), but it was ultimately his resurrection from the dead that caused them to give up their fear of the Pharisees and convert fully to the new religion.

There can be no doubt that the resurrection of Christ was the mainstay of the early church. There are about 630 references to the resurrection and eternal life in the New Testament. It is the theme that underpins everything else in the Christian message, and the guarantee of every promise, especially the promise of eternal life for those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour (John 5:24; 11:25).

Over the last two thousand years, this conviction has enabled ordinary men, women and children to endure great hardships, social ostracism, imprisonment, torture, and even death. Their strength has come from their belief that death, “the last enemy to be destroyed”, has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

One final point is worth noting. It was the Jewish custom to venerate the tombs of religious leaders and other dignitaries, but the early Christians showed no interest in Christ’s tomb. They showed no interest, because he was not there.

Implications of the Resurrection

The historical evidence strongly supports the contention that Jesus did rise from the dead and appeared to his disciples in a real, but transformed, body. There are certain implications to this which must inevitably follow:

- ❖ **It substantiates his other claims.** Jesus made some remarkable claims about himself including that he had authority to forgive sins and to judge the world, that he was the source of eternal life and the only way to the Father, and that he was God. No other religious leader has ever made such outrageous claims about themselves – but, then, no other religious leader has ever been raised from the dead!
- ❖ **It guarantees the promise of salvation.** The Bible teaches that the death of Jesus was not merely the death of a good man, but a sacrifice initiated by God himself to pay for the sins of all those who put their faith in him. His resurrection confirms the promise: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25).

- ❖ **It guarantees the victory of good over evil.** Jesus' resurrection was not only a triumph over death, but also over sin and evil which gave rise to death in the first place (Genesis 3:1-24). The Bible teaches that this victory will ultimately lead to the complete destruction of all evil, and of death itself (Revelation 20:7-15).
- ❖ **It guarantees a glorious inheritance.** The New Testament teaches that the resurrection of Jesus was the "firstfruits" of a greater harvest of those who believe in him. This resurrection of the believers will be to a "glorious inheritance" (Ephesians 1:18-21, Philippians 3:20-21).

Conclusions

The evidence is clear that Christ was raised from the dead, as he predicted, and is alive today. The implications of this are profound. Christ has proven, in a way that no other religious leader ever has, that his teachings are reliable and can be trusted.

Therefore, we can know for certain that there *is* a solution to the problem of sin and evil in the world, and that death *has* been defeated. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies" (John 11:25). He also said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

If you would like to get to know Jesus Christ, this is what you should do:

- ❖ **Pray to Jesus.** "The Lord is near to all who call on him ... he hears their cry and saves them" (Psalm 145:18-19).
- ❖ **Read the Bible.** You should start by reading the whole of the New Testament, asking Jesus to help you to understand what you are reading.
- ❖ **Join a church.** It is vital that you find a church which holds the Bible to be the final authority in all matters of faith and practice for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

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Acknowledgments

The following sources were used in the preparation of this paper:

Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead? by Dick Tripp, published by Dick Tripp, 1996.

Christianity for Skeptics by Steve Kumar, Hendrickson Pub., 2001.

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984.