

Questions Surrounding Jesus' Resurrection—Part 3

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We are examining the historical facts about Jesus' life. Did He identify Himself as the Son of God and teach He would die on the cross for the sins of the world? After His death, did Jesus rise from the dead and appear to His disciples? Is there any historical evidence that will lead those who really want to know to a solid, factual conclusion? Many scholars believe there is. In the past few weeks we have listed twelve historical facts that are accepted by almost all critical scholars today concerning Jesus' life, and the fifth fact in that list is a surprising one. It is this: **The disciples had experiences which they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus to them.** I asked historian Dr. Gary Habermas, "What is the evidence for this fact?"

Fact #5: The disciples had experiences which they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus

Dr. Gary Habermas: Well, given the belief that Jesus was crucified, which virtually everybody's admitting, I think the most crucial fact is that there were certain eyewitnesses, there were certain disciples, men and women, who deeply believed that they saw appearances of the risen Jesus. Or to say it a little different way, they had an experience which they thought was an appearance of the risen Jesus. And we know that, because they proclaimed it. I think that's a single most important testimony to their belief in the Resurrection appearances.

Fact #6: As a result of these experiences, the disciples were transformed from doubters into proud proclaimers of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Dr. Ben Witherington has written many well-received, scholarly books on the historical Jesus. He is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. I asked him why historians think Jesus must have appeared to His disciples. They believed it, but how do you know they were actually seeing something?

Dr. Ben Witherington: Well, in terms of the psychological profile of the disciples, if we believe that it is true that they denied, deserted and betrayed Jesus, that they had given Him up for lost when He died on the cross, psychologically,

something significant had to have happened to change all of their minds about this particular issue after the crucifixion of Jesus. Because, remember, no early Jews were looking for a crucified Messiah. If you wanted to scotch the rumor that Jesus was Messiah, get Him crucified, that would prove that He was cursed, not blessed by God, not the anointed one of God.

So here they are, completely shattered, their world has been turned upside down, they've spent the last year, two years, three years of their life, apparently for nothing, following Jesus. What was going to change that opinion?

Something from outside of themselves had to impact them like a sledgehammer, hitting them over the head to change their mind about the fact that Jesus was dead and gone. Something dramatic had to have happened. Martin Dibelius, a German scholar once said you need to posit an X big enough between the death of Jesus and the birth of the early church to explain the connection. If you don't posit an X big enough, then you haven't explained the historical connection.

The testimony of non-Christian historians

Next, is there any testimony from secular, non-Christian writers indicating they knew Jesus' disciples believed He had appeared to them? The answer is, "Yes." Dr. Gary Habermas explains.

Habermas: We've got a source like Phlegon that tells us that besides the darkness that surrounded the earth at the cross, he said that Jesus appeared later and He showed the disciples His wounds, His body. And again we're not told if they touched Him, but He showed Himself to the disciples after His Resurrection.

Josephus, in a highly disputed passage, says that Jesus showed Himself after three days. Now what a lot of scholars think about this passage is that the original reading is, the disciples taught that He appeared to them three days later, which, if that's the reading and that's what a lot of scholars will admit, it's exactly the point we're making right here.

You've got some Gnostics sources that admit the Resurrection. I'm thinking *The Gospel of Truth*, one of the earliest ones. You've got the *Treatise on the Resurrection* that does this, and even the *Gospel of Thomas*, the much debated *Gospel of Thomas*. Somebody will say, well yeah but there's no definite Resurrection in *Thomas*. But the opening line in the *Gospel of Thomas*, the risen one is doing the speaking, the living one is doing the speaking, and so it's often said that the whole perspective of *Thomas* is from the Resurrected Jesus.

You have two historians Tacitus and Suetonius, both well-respected Roman historians who don't teach the Resurrection, but they say, funny thing, after this guy died, this mischievous superstition broke out anew. So you have to say what's the basis for this mischievous teaching being spread around the Mediterranean?

So you have a couple of hints there from two historians, a couple of direct comments from Phlegon and probably Josephus. You've got some Gnostic gospels. That's a fair amount from outside of the New Testament itself.

Testimony from Christian writers

Now, what evidence from Christian writers indicates that Jesus appeared to different people after His death? Philosopher Dr. William Lane Craig cites the historical information in Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth as being responsible for persuading the majority of critical scholars today that the early disciples, groups, and individuals did, in fact, experience appearances of the risen Jesus.

Dr. William Lane Craig: The key factor which has led virtually all New Testament scholars to reassess positively the appearance traditions concerning Jesus after His death was a demonstration by the late German New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias that in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is not writing in his own words but he is quoting from an early Christian tradition, or saying that he received and in turn passed on to his converts.

He uses there the technical rabbinical terminology for the receiving and the transmission of sacred tradition. And Paul says that to the Corinthians: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,.." And then he quotes this old, pre-Pauline tradition: "that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures; and that He was buried; and that He was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures; and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve; then He appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive though some have fallen sleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all," Paul says, "as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me."

This early tradition has been dated to within five years after Jesus' crucifixion. And thus, you have in the early Christian tradition the naming of specific eyewitnesses and groups of people that were widely known in the early Christian church who at least **claimed** to have seen Jesus of Nazareth alive after His death. Now, we can write these off as hallucinations if we want to, but we cannot responsibly deny that they occurred. And that's why, for example, Paula Fredricksen, in the ABC Special, says that "As a historian, I must conclude that these men sincerely believed that they saw something and this something changed their lives."

So for that reason alone, as I say, it's virtually unanimous among New Testament scholars that these early disciples, groups, and individuals **did** in fact experience these post-mortem appearances of Jesus alive after His death.

How many people saw Jesus alive following the resurrection?

Now, how many people do you think Jesus appeared to after He arose from the dead? Was it to just a few individuals? Was it to just believers? No. Historian Dr. Gary Habermas presents the evidence and it may surprise you.

Habermas: The key list there is in 1 Corinthians 15. In that list you have individuals, leaders of the Church. Paul starts with Peter, ends with himself, and in the middle he has James, the brother of Jesus: three key individuals who saw the risen Jesus.

But you also have groups and that's very important to ascertain some evidence

for these appearances. You have the Twelve; you have a group he calls “all the Apostles”; you have more than “500 brethren, most of whom remain alive.”

Now, when you go to the Gospels I think also with good grounds we have, for example the women. You have several women at the tomb and probably Mary Magdalene alone as she returns. So you’ve got them sighting Jesus as well as the empty tomb and, again, if you’re going to put your best foot forward, you do not use women because they can’t go to a law court. You’re not going to impress people in first century Palestine. By far the best reason for starting with the women and secondarily with Mary is very simple: they saw the risen Jesus.

Now, the Gospels also tell us about a long walk with two men on the way to Emmaus. I mean, it takes a while to walk and talk for miles with this visitor who turns out to be Jesus.

You have appearances to the groups of disciples. You have in John 20 all the disciples present except, of course, Judas and Thomas. You have a second appearance a week later with Thomas in the famous incident where Thomas asks for evidence. A chapter later, John tells us about the disciples fishing on the seashore and, again, Jesus comes and He sort of makes a shore lunch for them and they’re looking at Him from the shore and you know, Peter, as impetuous as ever, dives in to try to beat the guys with the boat carrying all these fish and they talk to Jesus there on the shore.

So you’ve got a wide range of activities. You’ve got men and you’ve got women. You’ve got individuals and you’ve got groups. You’ve got indoors, outdoors, sitting, standing, fishing, making a shore lunch; walking with them; hanging on by the ankles. Wide variety.

Fact #7: As a result of the preaching of the disciples regarding the resurrection, the Church was born and it grew.

One of the most respected historians in the world writing on the life of Jesus is Dr. N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey. For 22 years he taught at Oxford University. I asked him why he and other historians are persuaded that the disciples believed the risen Jesus appeared to them. As a historian, does he explain the Christian church after Jesus’ life?

Dr. N. Thomas Wright: Well, that’s a very interesting question, because the origin of Christianity is actually itself one of the most extraordinary phenomenon in the history of the world. In A.D. 20, there ain’t such a thing as a Christian church. By A.D. 120, the emperor in Rome is getting worried letters from one of his proconsuls off in northern Turkey about what to do about these Christians. So in that century, you have this extraordinary thing suddenly appearing out of nowhere. And all the early Christians for whom we have actual evidence would say, “I’ll tell you why it’s happened. It’s because of Jesus of Nazareth and the fact that He was raised from the dead.”

Were the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus merely visions or hallucinations?

Critical scholars are persuaded of the fact that the disciples believed Jesus appeared to them. But they ask, What did the disciples really see? Did Jesus stand before them in His literal physical body, or did they experience a vision or an hallucination of Jesus? Dr. Ben Witherington presents the evidence.

Witherington: Most scholars would certainly say that the disciples believed that they saw Jesus, and many of them would just want to leave it there and say okay, it was subjective phenomenon that happened here. But if you interpret those Gospel documents about the resurrection appearances of the risen Lord. And you interpret the Pauline evidence, the rest of the New Testament evidence, they were claiming far more than that. They were claiming to actually have a physical encounter with Jesus after His death. And that He ate, was tangible, could be touched, that He was still moving in space and time as a real person. So they were claiming more than just having had a vision of Jesus.

If you deny the Resurrection then what *did* happen?

How can we respond to those people who ignore all of this evidence and all of the sources supplying the evidence for these facts and just simply say, “Well, it’s not the Resurrection, but, yeah, something happened”?

Habermas: I think the key here is the way we frame the discussion. We started with facts which virtually all scholars hold as one. And you’ve got this list. We’ve narrowed the list down arbitrarily to say, “Look, I don’t even need that many. You’ve given me way too many.”

Now, when you frame the discussion on the critic’s ground, what you’re saying is something like this: “I know the New Testament says a lot more than this, but I’m not asking for the whole New Testament. I’m just asking you for this narrow amount that you’ve given me many times in your books. So you can’t walk away from this and say, well, some wonderful things happened and we don’t know what.

For a moment, let’s not think about what we don’t know, what the critic thinks we don’t know. Let’s talk about what we **do** know because what we know, and those five facts in particular, the 12 facts more generally, what we know is sufficient to refute the naturalistic theories. So again, let’s not hide behind, “Well, granted, something happened.” No. No. You’ve given us enough facts here to say the earliest eyewitnesses believed they saw the risen Jesus. We need an alternative if the answer is not going to be they really saw Him.

But strangely enough, most scholars won’t take that route, either in their books, in dialogues, they won’t take that route. They feel like they’re trapped: “If I take this theory you’re going to be coming after me.”

I’ll say, “Now, wait a minute. I’m using your facts. If you don’t believe the conclusion, what’s this missing X? What do you think really happened?”

They usually at that point will opt out of the discussion any way they can. But if they **do** take a naturalistic theory, my assertion is, the known historical facts, those admitted by all scholars, are sufficient to refute those naturalistic theories as well as give the best evidences for the Resurrection.

Once you accept the Resurrection as fact, what is the next step?

What is the next step for the person just crossed the line intellectually and said, “All right, the resurrection *did* happen”?

Craig: I think that the next step is to realize that Jesus of Nazareth holds the key that unlocks the door to eternal life. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me shall never die; and though he die, yet shall he live.” Death, I think, is man’s greatest existential enemy because it puts all of human existence with a question mark behind it. What is the meaning and significance of my life if ultimately I live only to die, and if the human race as a whole lives only to die? And the resurrection of Jesus tells us that the grave is not our ultimate destiny. That ultimately our destiny is eternal life and fellowship with God that is available through faith in Jesus Christ as He promised.

So I think that the resurrection of Jesus, if it occurred, is something that has tremendous existential significance for every human being because it holds the key to purpose and meaning in life here on earth and in the life hereafter.

What is the Gospel?

Now, maybe you are persuaded by the historical evidence that Jesus actually rose from the dead. But did you know that believing that doesn’t make you a Christian any more than being a church member makes you a Christian? So what should you do?

First, realize the evidence points to the fact that what Jesus said about Himself is true, namely, that He is the Son of God.

Second, in the evidence we find that Jesus Himself tells us why He came and what the good news is all about. Dr. Darrell Bock, Professor of New Testament at Dallas Seminary, tells us.

Dr. Darrell Bock: I think the gospel is the good news that God has provided a way to come into your life forever. Not as a ticket, but into a relationship. And He has provided the way to that relationship through the person and work of Jesus Christ, not only the sacrifice for sins but the provision of His very own Spirit coming into your life so that you can relate to God on a healthy level and overcome the sinfulness that is inherent in you. And the good news is that God is committed to that relationship, so committed to that relationship, that He sent His only Son to die that it might take place. And the only requirement that exists—it’s a serious requirement—the only requirement is that you believe that He’s done that for you and, in faith, you ask for that relationship through Jesus Christ. It’s that simple, and that demanding, because once God comes into your life, He’s in it to do a marvelous work, a work that grounds you in a relationship with God that will never end.