

"RISE"
Part 2: The Evidence for the Resurrection
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 11, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** The resurrection of Jesus is the very foundation of Christianity. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then Christianity collapses. But it is on this most foundational belief that people in our culture have so many troubles. The common response that I encounter today goes something like this:
 - ***“Well I am sure that ancient people thought the resurrection of Jesus was very plausible. With their lack of education and scientific knowledge they were inclined to believe such things. It resonated with them. But in our educated and scientific age we cannot believe such things anymore.”***
- The late Christopher Hitchens, one of the most popular atheists of our day, writes the following: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** ***“One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody...had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs).”***¹
 - Hitchens quotes the 19th century German poet Heinrich Hein who wrote, **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** ***“In dark ages people are best guided by religion, as in a pitch black night a blind man is the best guide; he knows the roads and paths better than the man who can see. When daylight comes, however, it is foolish to use blind old men as guides.”***²
 - To summarize, this view says it is perfectly understandable that ancient people believed in things like Jesus rising from the dead. Such an idea resonated with their uneducated worldview and so they accepted it. But today we are not so infantile in our understanding and so we cannot accept Jesus’ resurrection.
- The problem with this is that it simply is not true. As we will see, ancient people found the claims of Jesus’ resurrection just as, if not more, implausible than we do today. Yet, history shows that despite all of this millions came to believe.
 - Paul knows how difficult it is to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And so in the first 11 verses of I Corinthians 15 he acts like an attorney in defense of the resurrection.
 - He is going to go on in this chapter to show the difference it makes in our lives but first he wants to establish that it is true. So this is what I want to do with you today as well. If you are a skeptic or someone who is just looking into Christianity I want to give you some of the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection. If you already are a Christian I want to solidify your beliefs.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great*, 64.

² Ibid., 43.

- To that end we will do three things: First, we will cross-examine the prosecution's case. Second, we will consider the eyewitnesses testimony. Finally, we will contemplate the verdict.

A CROSS EXAMINATION OF THE PROSECUTIONS CASE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** First then, **cross-examining the prosecution's case.** Let's cross-examine this assertion that the resurrection of Jesus was more plausible to ancient people than to us today because it resonated with their pre-modern worldview.
 - What I want to argue is simply this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5) ancient people found the idea of a man being raised bodily from the dead just as, if not more, inconceivable than we do today.**
- Scholar N.T. Wright has written one of the definitive works on the resurrection entitled, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. In this massive 800-page book Wright does an exhaustive survey on what people thought about death and the afterlife from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D.
 - He shows that there were two primary worldviews at that time. The first was the Greco Roman worldview and the second was the Jewish worldview.
- The Greco-Roman worldview was very diverse in what it believed happened after death. Like today, some believed that you ceased to exist at death. But like today most believed you lived as a spirit in another world. But everyone was agreed on one thing: people who die do not come back to life in their bodies.
 - One ancient writer sums it up in saying, **"Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection."**³ Resurrection, especially among the educated, was a ridiculed idea.
- But we must go further and say that the Greco-Roman worldview did not even want it to happen. Why? Most people followed Plato in believing that what really mattered was the soul not the body. For them, the material world and the body were defiling and corrupt. The body was a prison house for the soul. Death therefore was viewed as being the soul's liberation from what imprisoned it.
 - One author writes, **"In this worldview resurrection was not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul, having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back."**⁴
- If you told the average person on the street in Rome or Ephesus that a man named Jesus died and then rose bodily from the dead, he or she would write you off as a lunatic. He or she would say that such things are not possible. Dead men do not return bodily from the dead. Not ever.
 - So, far from being inclined to believe Jesus rose from the dead, Greco-Roman people thought the very idea was impossible, undesirable, and ridiculous.
- The Jewish worldview also could not accept the claim that Jesus rose from the dead but for different reasons. Jews believed that God's kingdom was coming. Jews believed that, on the Day his kingdom arrived, God would rid the world of suffering, death, injustice, and disease. It was on that Day that God would corporately resurrect all his people.

³ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 32.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 206.

- So Jewish people did not believe that one single man would ever be resurrected. Wright says, ***“Nobody imagined that any individuals had already been raised, or would be raised in advance of the great last day.”***⁵
 - So if you walked up to a Jewish person and started telling them that the crucified Rabbi named Jesus had been resurrected, that Jewish person would say to you, ***“Are you insane? How could that be? Look around you. Has disease and death ended? Is true justice established in the world? Obviously not. Therefore the resurrection has not yet happened.”***
- I say all this to demonstrate that when Christians claimed Jesus rose from the dead they were doing it with people who, far from being inclined to believe such things, actually believed it was impossible, undesirable, and absurd.
 - So as modern people we cannot write off the resurrection of Jesus because we think that first century people were grossly ignorant and therefore prone to believe such things while we today are more enlightened.
 - Listen, first century people found the claim of Jesus’ resurrection just as inconceivable as you and I. And yet many believed. Why the complete shift in their thinking? It was because of the evidence. The evidence was so compelling that it shattered their worldview.

CONSIDERING THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

- So having cross-examined the prosecution let’s turn to the second thing: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) considering the eyewitness testimony.**
 - In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is seeking to remind these Corinthian Christians of the resurrection of Jesus. In order to strengthen their faith in the gospel message, Paul acts as an attorney in defense of the resurrection of Jesus.
 - Now please note carefully that he is not trying to make a full-blown case for the resurrection. There are many questions he does not answer and that I will not answer this morning. What he does do is provide one of the key pieces of evidence for the resurrection.
 - That key piece of evidence is the eyewitness testimony.
 - Paul brings forward one eyewitness after another. They have different personalities and diverse feelings toward Jesus. Some loved him, others hated him, but all agree on one thing – they claim that they saw Jesus in the flesh after he had died and been buried.
 - Now just because someone claims to see something does not mean it is true. When people make claims to see something you need to consider things like who claimed to see it, their motives, and the evidence for what they claimed to see. So let’s hear from these eyewitnesses.

THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF A DISGRACED LEADER

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7) First, the eyewitness testimony of a disgraced leader. READ 5a - and that he appeared to Cephas.**
 - Cephas is Peter’s name in Aramaic. Peter was a leader even among the disciples. But he had disgraced himself by denying Jesus three times. It is astounding to me that Peter did not commit suicide like Judas. And yet suddenly we find Peter

⁵ Wright, 205.

preaching to the crowds that Jesus has risen. Because of this, Peter is thrown in prison, threatened, and eventually he is crucified upside down.

- So how do you explain the fact that a Jewish man, who considered the idea of one man being raised from dead to be absurd, suddenly became one of the greatest preachers that Jesus rose from the dead?
 - How do you explain the fact that this cowardly denier of Jesus suddenly starts preaching the resurrection of Jesus so clearly that he is brutally killed for it?
- These are important questions. But to be fair they do not clinch the case because one man's testimony does not establish the facts of a case.

THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF FRIENDS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** That is why in the second place Paul brings forward **the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' friends**. Look again at verse 5. **READ 5 – then to the twelve**. 'The twelve' is shorthand for the disciples.
 - The testimony of these men is important because they were the ones who knew him best. They are not strangers who could have mistaken his identity.
 - One of the most striking things about these stories is the physical demonstrations that Jesus makes. He shows them his wounds. He lets them touch his body. He eats fish.
 - He did this to prove two things. First, that he was physical and not a ghost like Greco Roman people would have thought. And second, that he was the same Jesus who had been crucified and not some body double.
- So now you have to ask yourself: why would eleven Jewish men make a claim about the bodily resurrection of their leader when everyone they spoke to would say that such a story is impossible and ridiculous? Well the most common objection here is that the twelve made up the story.
 - But listen, when people lie they only do so in order to try and gain something from it like money or power or reputation. But these men gained nothing. In fact, they lost everything. They were socially ostracized, impoverished, thrown in prison, beaten, scattered from each other over the face of the earth, and in the end every single one of them except John were brutally killed for their beliefs.
 - If they were lying don't you think at least one of them would have recanted when faced with death? As Blaise Pascal put it, ***"I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut."***⁶
- But again it could be said that just because a small group of like-minded people claim something it does not make it true. Many small groups of people work together to defraud others.

THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF THE CROWDS

- This is why Paul brings forward **(SHOW SLIDE 9) the eyewitness testimony of the crowds**. **READ 6 - Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.**

⁶ Cited in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 210.

- Now here is what you need to understand. Even the most critical scholars believe that 1 Corinthians was written around AD 54, which is 20-25 years after the death of Jesus. So Paul makes this claim about the 500 only 20 years or so after the purported event.
 - Paul is saying that if they do not believe him they should go ask the eyewitnesses though some have since died. Paul is making a bold claim here. If he is lying then he can very easily be shown to be a fraud. Paul is so certain of the evidence that he invites anyone to interrogate the witnesses.
- Well at this point some people will pull out the objection that what probably happened here is an occurrence of mass hallucination. Dr. Gary Collins, a renowned psychologist, writes about how this simply does not work. He writes,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren’t something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.”⁷**
 - So now we have Peter, the 12, and 500 of Jesus’ disciples all claiming that Jesus appeared in a resurrected body. What do you do with all these claims?
 - Well it could be said, **“these were his followers and friends. We cannot accept their testimony because they were biased.”** That is why Paul brings forward his last two witnesses.

THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF A SKEPTIC

- In the fourth place Paul gives **(SHOW SLIDE 11) the eyewitness testimony of a skeptic.** Look at verse 7. **READ 7 - Then he appeared to James.**
 - This James is the half-brother of Jesus. Why bring up James? Because James is one of the last people to believe that Jesus is the risen and reigning King of the universe.
- During his lifetime, Jesus’ brothers did not believe he was the Messiah. They were embarrassed by him. John writes in John 7:5, **“even his own brothers did not believe in him.”**
 - And yet the next time we hear of James, he and his brothers are in the upper room with the other disciples after Jesus’ death.
 - Then when Paul visits the church in Jerusalem 14 years later, he says there were three pillars of the church in Jerusalem - Peter, John, and James.
 - In Acts 21:18 James is the head of the church in Jerusalem.
 - James goes on to write the book of James and Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, tells us that the Sanhedrin stoned James to death in AD 60.⁸
- What would it take for you to believe that your brother was the resurrected Messiah? Even more than that, what would it take to believe it so much that you would be stoned for it? How do you account for this skeptic turned believer? Paul’s answer is **“Then [Jesus] appeared to James.”**

⁷ Cited in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 322.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.200.

- Even the skeptical New Testament critic Hans Grass admits that the conversion of James is one of the surest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

THE EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY OF AN ENEMY

- Well, Paul has saved his star witness for last. It could still be said that the testimony of these other eyewitnesses are invalid because they were his friends and family. In the final place Paul asks us to consider **(SHOW SLIDE 12) the eyewitness testimony of an enemy.**
 - Paul's last eyewitness is himself. Paul asks you to consider the evidence of his conversion and the evidence of his life.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) First, consider the evidence of Paul's conversion.**
 - **READ 8-10a - *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.***
- In Acts 9 Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. A blinding light struck him and he fell to the ground. But he did not just see a light. Neither does he say it was an internal experience. Paul says here in verse 8 that Jesus appeared to him. It was an objective experience outside himself. In 1 Corinthians 9:1 he says, ***"Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen the Lord?"*** Once again though, just because Paul claims it does not make it true.
 - So consider who it is who is making this claim. In verse 9 Paul points out that he hated Jesus. He was hell bent on destroying the people who said Jesus had risen. But he says he was instantly converted. In verse 8 he compares conversion to the traumatic experience of being born.
- For the disciples to believe that Jesus rose from the dead they had to experience the trauma of birth. It was not easy to believe Jesus had risen. But in a sense it was easy. The twelve disciples had been through a long gestation period. They had walked with Jesus for around 4 years. They had listened to him teach and seen him perform miracles. They were, in a sense, at full term and were ready to be born. Like any birth, it was a difficult thing for them to grasp Jesus' resurrection but when they recalled all that he said and did it gradually made sense.
 - But not Paul. His conversion was like a far more traumatic birth. He says he was "untimely born." This is a word used for a baby being pulled from the womb before it is ready like a premature birth. Paul was in no way ready to be born. He was persecuting the church.
 - But suddenly he says Jesus met him on that road. Suddenly this premature baby was pulled from the womb and birthed. But like a premature baby's organs are unprepared to deal with the sudden realities of the outside world, Paul was totally unprepared for the reality of what he saw. He was deeply traumatized. In Acts 9:9 Luke writes that ***"For three days [Paul] was blind, and did not eat or drink anything."***
 - So Paul says, ***"if you don't believe Jesus rose from the dead how do you account for my conversion? I was not a friend of Jesus. I was his enemy. And yet suddenly, from one day to the next, I believed. How do you account for my conversion when I was his enemy?"***

- But it is not just his conversion. **(SHOW SLIDE 14) consider the evidence of Paul's life.**
 - **READ 10 - *I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*** Paul is not boasting. He knows it is all by God's grace. But he worked hard for the cause of Jesus.
- So Paul is saying, ***"How do you account not just for my radical conversion but for what I did with my life? How do you account for the fact that I left my position as a respected Jewish leader and became a despised Christian missionary? How do you account for the fact that I entered a life of poverty, labor, and suffering? How do you account for the fact that I was whipped, beaten, stoned, left for dead, shipwrecked three times, in constant danger, deprivation, and anxiety all in an effort to make known to people that Jesus is risen?"***
 - Paul says, the only way you can account for his radical conversion and for his life's work is that Jesus appeared to him on that road.

CONTEMPLATING THE VERDICT

- And so that brings us to the end of the eyewitness accounts. In our last few minutes **(SHOW SLIDE 15) contemplating the verdict.** When you consider the eyewitness testimony what verdict do you give? Do you believe Jesus rose from the dead?
 - The earliest witnesses were unanimous on their verdict. Paul summarizes it all in verse 11. **READ 11 - *Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*** Christians disagree with each other about many things but on this we are in total agreement. Note carefully with me that only 20 years after Jesus died Paul is saying that there was complete agreement on this fact: God raised Jesus from the dead. So this was not some idea that grew over time. There was no debate among the early followers regarding it. From the outset Christians were unanimous on their belief that God raised Jesus from the dead.
 - What does it mean that he rose? It means he has the power to forgive sin and to reconcile you back to God. It means that Jesus is the reigning king of the universe who will one day return. He will judge all people. Those who have received him will go to everlasting life and those have rejected him will go to everlasting punishment. It all depends on how you respond to him in this life.
- So what is your verdict? Perhaps some of you are like James, the hard-nosed skeptic. You need a lot of evidence before you will believe. Fair enough. I would just encourage you to actually look at the evidence.
 - Listen, ancient people found this story as incredible and inconceivable as you and I, but unlike so many today they examined the evidence and what they found was overwhelming.
- Others of you want to believe but when you consider what a mess you have made of your life, you don't feel like God could ever accept you. But look at whom Jesus appeared to?
 - He appeared to Peter, the man who publicly denied him. He appeared to James, his own brother who turned away from him. He appeared to Paul, the man who was his enemy. Jesus seeks out those who hurt him most. He seeks out the messed up and sinful. That's the kind of Saviour he is.
- Perhaps this morning some of you are having a Damascus road like experience. The light is shining around you and you know in the depth of your being that Jesus is alive and real.
 - Bow your knee to him. Entrust your life to him. Get up and be baptized and follow him. What is your verdict?