

Why I'm a Christian

Week 2: Jesus

The other day I needed some black socks to wear. I looked in my dresser and didn't see any. So I went to Courtney and said, "Hey do you know where I might have some black socks?" She said she thought she put some in my sock drawer. I went and looked in my sock drawer and went back to her.

"No black socks in the sock drawer."

She said, "Did you look in the back?"

I went and looked in the back. "No black socks in sock drawer, babe."

"Did you look in the bottom of the sock drawer, in the back?"

I went back and looked in the back of the sock drawer, at the bottom...and there they were. Black socks. There they were there all along.

I can't even confidently assert the non-existence of black socks in my own sock drawer.

I tell you that to bring up an important concept for today...falsifiability.

Some things in life are falsifiable. "There are no black socks in my sock drawer" is a claim that can be proven false.

This is one of the things that is absolutely distinct about Christianity among other religions. It is falsifiable. No other religion is falsifiable. Many of them are based on supposed divine revelations that religious figures received. On what basis would you confirm or deny that claim?

You either take them at their word, or you don't.

But Christianity is different.

Here is how the apostle Paul says it, in 1 Corinthians chapter 15...

1 Corinthians 15:14

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Christianity makes a claim that an event happened in space and time: Jesus Christ died and then was raised from the dead. And it says, if this didn't happen, you should dismiss the entire religion. Pull the plug. Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Assuming you wanted to start a religion, the worst possible thing you could do would be to invent something easily falsifiable. At least, if you want it to succeed.

Because it is based on a historical event that is falsifiable, you can't start by asking if it's helpful or if you like it. That is how you would rightly approach other religions. Do I like Buddha's teachings? Or am I more of a Joseph Smith kind of guy?

But that's not how you approach Jesus. You don't start with, "Do I like his teachings?" You are forced to start with, "Did He rise from the dead?" And if the answer is yes, what you like or don't like is not as pressing concern because you have suddenly become busy bowing down to him.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. We're gonna look at Paul's argument for the resurrection. This is the evidence he gives before he makes the claim that if this wasn't true, our faith would be totally in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Paul's summarized argument for the resurrection is that the tomb was empty, he appeared to hundreds and hundreds of people after he resurrected, leaving large groups of eyewitnesses all saying the same thing, and all of those eyewitnesses lived the rest of their lives believing that was true.

The way I'd like to frame the discussion today is borrowed from a philosopher named William Lane Craig. Some of his resources are linked and available on our series website WhyImaChristian.com

If, for the sake of argument, we approach the documents of the New Testament not as inspired, holy books but rather simply as a collection of documents written in the Greek language, handed down out of the 1st century, telling this remarkable story about this man Jesus of Nazareth without any assumption whatsoever as to their reliability – the same way we would approach other ancient documents for history. You might be surprised to learn that when ancient historians approach the New Testament documents with this attitude, that the majority of scholars today accept the central facts undergirding the inference to the resurrection of Jesus. And I want to emphasize that I am not talking here about conservative scholars or evangelical scholars; rather, I am talking about the broad mainstream of critical, historical New Testament scholarship today – the work that is done by professors who teach at secular universities and non-evangelical theological colleges. Amazing as it may seem, most of them have come to agree with the historicity of the central facts undergirding the resurrection of Jesus.

William Lane Craig

He's not saying all of these scholars believe Jesus is the resurrected Messiah, of course. But there are three facts that almost no one disputes.

What I'd like to do is explain some of the historical facts surrounding the story of Jesus's resurrection and explain why they are broadly accepted as historical facts, from Christian and non-Christian scholars.

Three facts that require explanation:

- 1) The empty tomb
- 2) The appearances of Jesus alive after his death
- 3) The disciples belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

The point is, if you don't believe Jesus raised from the dead, you need to find an alternative story to account for all three of these accepted historical facts. And that's more difficult to do than you might think.

Let me explain why most scholars accept these as fact:

Fact 1) - The empty tomb.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

Jesus was buried in Joseph of Arimathea. Land ownership was legal then just like now, with documents that indicate who owned what. On Sunday morning, when some of Jesus's female followers attempt to put burial spices on him in his tomb, they know exactly where to go. The location of the tomb was publicly known.

On the Sunday morning following his crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.

1 - Six independent sources state that the tomb was found empty. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 1 Corinthians all attest to the tomb being empty. When an event is recorded by two unconnected sources, our confidence goes up that an event actually happened. The earlier those sources are dated, the higher our confidence.

2 - No body was ever presented. This is very simple, but as people began to claim that Jesus had risen from the dead, the easiest way to shut the whole thing down would have been for someone to show Jesus's body in the tomb. He obviously didn't resurrect if his body was still in the tomb.

In fact, Matthew reports to us that the Jewish leaders quickly levelled the accusation that Jesus's body had been stolen by his disciples. That claim is mentioned even years later in writings of Justin Martyr and Tertullian. This shows that the body was in fact missing from the tomb.

3 - The tomb was not enshrined. There is no record of early Christians making Jesus's tomb a place of devotion and pilgrimage, which was normal for religious observance at that time. Why is there not a shrine to Jesus at his tomb? Because his body wasn't there. There was no reason for Peter to go to his tomb to remember him because Peter had breakfast with him.

4 - This might be surprising, but for historians, one of the most powerful evidences for the empty tomb is the claim that it was women who first discovered the body. Women as first eye witnesses Mary Magdalene is named as the first eyewitness of the risen Christ, and other women are mentioned as the earliest eyewitnesses in the other gospels, too. First Century historian Josephus tells us that this was a time in which the testimony of women was not admissible evidence in courts because of their low social status. The early pagan critics of Christianity latched onto this and dismissed the Resurrection because of it. One example is from a 2nd century man named Celsus who ridiculed christianity as the word of "hysterical females." If this were legend, or if this were being fabricated or altered in any way then the writers would've claimed that men were the first to find the empty tomb.

So it is broadly accepted as historical fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Most scholars, by far, hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb.

- **Jacob Kremer, Professor of NT studies, University of Vienna**

Now, that's just one fact. It doesn't prove anything. There are all sorts of plausible theories as to how the tomb could've been empty. But any theory has to account for the other facts as well.

Fact 2) - Appearances of Jesus alive after his death.

1 Corinthians 15

that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is one of the first accounts of eye-witness encounters with Jesus after his death. This letter to the church in Corinth was written 15 to 20 years after the death of Jesus. Notice that Paul lists the eye witnesses, says it was individuals and also groups, and that many of these eye witnesses are still alive and can corroborate. This is a letter to a church in a city, which was to be read aloud as a public document.

This is eyewitness testimony, written in the lifetime of other eyewitnesses.

And check out some of the people that Paul lists as eyewitnesses.

- **Peter** - went from coward hiding from people asking him questions to boldly preaching about a resurrected Jesus.
- **500 people at once** - not simply wishful thinking. Not visions or hallucinations.
- **James** - Jesus brother. What would it take for you to believe your sibling was God?
- **Paul** - Paul says, "He appeared also to me."

Paul was a Jewish Pharisee, he was a persecutor of the church, he hated the Christian heresy, and he was determined to do everything in his power to stamp it out. He was actually responsible for the deaths of Christian men and women simply because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He was out to disprove Christianity.

Then it all turned around for this man because on the road to Damascus he saw this appearance of Jesus. And he said, "I saw Jesus our Lord" and this is what caused Saul the Pharisee to be transformed into Paul the Apostle and missionary of early Christianity. This is attested to in his own letters in the first hand. He went from trying to kill Christians to recruiting for them.

You can look at Paul's turn around naturalistically and say that we don't know what actually happened but any number of things could've caused this about change in his life. People change their lives all the time. But this was a pretty big change. The people he was killing because he thought they were so wrong and dangerous, he becomes a leader and recruiter for? Whatever did happen to him would have had to have been significant. And then, the thing that I don't have an answer for, is he begins to claim that he

had an encounter with a resurrected Jesus and that just so happens to match the claims of the other apostles?

So we have in Paul's information very good grounds for believing that various individuals and groups of people under various circumstances saw appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. Not to mention that the 4 gospels and book of Acts and Peter in his letters all include claims of seeing have Jesus alive from the dead. With many of those who made those claims going on to live very differently afterwards...

It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.

-Gerd Ludemann. New Testament scholar, University of Gottingen

This leads us to our third fact.

Fact 3) - disciples belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

Right or wrong, they absolutely believed that Jesus rose from the dead.

After Jesus crucifixion, his followers were devastated. Hiding in fear for their lives. Jewish people at the time had no concept for a messiah who would be executed by the state. Their only concept of resurrection was a universal event on Judgement Day at the end of the world. It was a resurrection where all of the curse would be lifted. So if there was still sickness and dying on the earth then the resurrection hadn't happened yet. It would have struck them as nonsensical for God resurrect one person but not remove sickness and death that plagues us all.

As well, under Old Testament law, anyone who was executed by hanging was under the curse of God. Jewish people applied this to crucifixion also.

So what the crucifixion of Jesus revealed was that the Pharisees were right after all; that for these three years, these disciples had been following a man under the curse of God, a man who was a heretic, a Jewish schismatic, an accursed man.

The crucifixion was literally a catastrophe for them, the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

Yet somehow, in spite of all of this, the disciples came to believe that God had risen Jesus from the dead and even under threat of death never recanted. In fact, we know from history that all of the apostles were eventually killed because they kept claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead.

People don't die for a lie. You lie because you think things will go better for you. They could have lied to save their lives, and they didn't. Because they couldn't.

Let me share how His followers, were martyred for their faith:

- James the disciple- beheaded with a sword
- James Jesus's brother - stoned and clubbed to death
- Bartholomew - conflicting stories about how he died but most believed he was whipped to death.
- Philip - believed to have been crucified or hanged
- Andrew - crucified on an x - shaped cross
- Thomas - impaled with a spear

- Matthias - stoned and beheaded (just to make sure he was really dead)
- Thaddaeus - believed to either be clubbed to death or killed with arrows
- John - Survived being burned in oil. Exiled.
- Peter - crucified upside down

Through all of this, not a single one of them recanted. Not a single one of them turned and denied their testimony. Not one of them... facing unspeakable pain, and not one of them changed their story.

I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut.

-Pascal

It is historically certain that, whatever happened, the disciples actually believed Jesus rose from the dead.

OK, let's take a breather here. I know that was a content dump and I've got another one coming. So let's pause for a second and make sure we are all on the same page as to what is happening here.

Growing up in church I heard this song:

He lives (He lives), He lives (He lives), Christ Jesus lives today
 He walks with me and talks with me
 Along life's narrow way
 He lives (He lives), He lives (He lives), Salvation to impart
 You ask me how I know He lives?
 He lives within my heart

How do I know he lives? He's in my heart. Now, if God exists then it is true that we can know him experientially. So our own personal experience can in fact be a reference point. The song isn't wrong. And I understand why it was written that way. It wouldn't sound as good to say, "You ask me how I know he lives? Because I find it to be the most plausible explanation of the historical data."

Today we aren't looking at our own experiences, good or bad. We are looking at what we know in history and trying to make sense of it.

Three facts, agreed upon by the majority of New Testament scholars.

Empty tomb

Attestations to post mortem encounters with risen Jesus

Disciples believed he was truly risen.

The question is: what is the best explanation of these 3 facts?

This is where the disagreement arises. Scholars are fairly united on the historicity of these facts; the disagreement comes with how you best explain them.

Alternative theories:

1) This is a legend.

In my experience, this is the most compelling alternative explanation to people. I don't think it's plausible though. And I want to really try to prove that to you if I can.

a - The timeline doesn't work.

The simple answer to this objection is that there was not nearly enough time elapsed between Jesus' resurrection and the birth of the church for a legend to develop.

People were worshipping Jesus as God immediately after his resurrection and we have documentation of hymns that could not have possibly been legendary. The hymn about Christ as God in phil 2 is generally believed to have been written just a few years after Jesus death. Paul quotes it in his letter. That shows that the earliest christians worshipped Jesus immediately after his death.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Speaking about 1 Corinthians 15, which we've been looking at today, William Lane Craig says:

Paul uses here not only the technical rabbinical terms for "received" and "delivered" with regard to the information that he is passing on to the Corinthians, but verses 3-5 are a highly stylized four-line formula which is replete with non-Pauline characteristics. This has convinced all scholars that Paul is, just as he says, quoting from an old tradition which he himself received and then in turn passed on to his converts in Corinth. This tradition probably goes back to at least to Paul's fact-finding journey to Jerusalem around AD 36, when he spent two weeks with Peter and with James in Jerusalem. Now when you recall that Jesus was crucified around AD 30, that means that this information goes back to within the first 5 years after Jesus' crucifixion. So short a time span, and such personal contact in this case, make it idle to talk of legend with regard to the information in this formula.

-William Lane Craig

All four of the gospels are written inside the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Scholarly consensus is that the gospel of Mark was written about thirty years after Jesus's death, in approximately AD 65. Matthew and Luke were written around a decade or so later, with the gospel of John about a decade after that. Not enough time had passed for legends to have arisen. In other words, these accounts weren't written down after centuries of transmission but within the lifetimes of people who had been eye witnesses to the events.

In their book *The Jesus Legend*, Paul Eddy and Gregory Boyd say

The fact that this story originated and was accepted while Jesus' mother, brothers and original disciples (and Jesus' opponents) were all still alive renders the legendary explanation all the more implausible. It is hard to understand how this story came about in this environment, in such a short span of time, unless it is substantially rooted in history.

-Paul Eddy and Gregory Boyd

b (2) - The style is historical reportage.

In his book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* Richard Bauckham says that good ancient historians ordinarily interviewed eye witnesses and documented it by naming them in their work.

That was their version of a "works cited" page on a report. Have you ever done a big report and turned it in and had a boss or professor say, "I didn't want footnotes, I wanted endnotes!" Footnotes and endnotes

are different ways of accomplishing the same thing. OK, what ancient historians would do was not footnotes or endnotes, but instead they would mention the names of the people they had interviewed inside of their work.

For example, In Mark 15:21 he mentions Simon the Cyrene, the man compelled to carry Jesus' cross, and gives his sons names, Alexander and Rufus, so he could be tracked down. When John is telling the story about Jesus in the garden, the night of his arrest, he includes the name of malchus, the soldier whose ear Peter chopped off and Jesus put back on. He would be a good guy to track down, would love to hear him tell that story.

There are lots of places in the accounts of Jesus's life where individuals names seem randomly mentioned in the stories...those are footnotes. These people were eyewitnesses being named, potentially because they had been interviewed or questions, bare minimum as reference points for hearers to know they could go follow up with them if they had questions. This was the historiographical custom of the time. The authors are listing their sources.

c (3)- Legendary accounts don't sound like this from antiquity.

The documents that were written much later, Gospel of Thomas, gospel of Peter, did in fact have fantastic elements that people threw a flag on. False gospels have things like Jesus coming out of the tomb being 60 feet tall and his cross floating behind him. One has Jesus as a kid throwing a bully kid onto a roof. They were written about 300 years later and they did in fact become very legendary and they were in fact rejected, exactly as you would want and expect.

C.S. Lewis who was a literature professor, among other things, explains this:

I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage ... Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative ... The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read.
-C.S. Lewis

d (4) - The documents could not have been changed later

Some people ask, what if these stories were changed later on? What if Constantine made changes to spread his use of Christianity to control his empire?...well, copies of New Testament letters quickly began to spread. In multiple languages. Even without manuscripts, church fathers quotations recreate over 95% of NT. For Constantine to make changes, in the 300s after all this spreading has happened, he would have to find every copy, in every language, and change every written sermon from early church fathers.

In other words they were recorded too early to have been falsified then, and they spread so quickly they could not have been falsified later on.

e (5)- if the resurrection was somehow added in later, how did the church get started then?

Remember, the disciples were utterly destroyed by the crucifixion. Many of them, for some reason, experience profound life change and the church starts...but if the argument is that the early church didn't actually say Jesus resurrected and that was added later on...then why did the early church form in the first place? What were they forming around? Certainly not embarrassed, shamed, false messiah.

f (6) - Why did the Jewish early christians change their day of worship from Saturday (Jewish Sabbath for thousands of years) to Sunday?

Is it your experience that religious people like to change things?

2) Conspiracy theory.

They stole the body and made the whole thing up.

A decent theory in my opinion, is that the disciples stole the body. That seems plausible.

But unfortunately it goes against historical fact number two. The disciples believed that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead.

These same disciples died for their claim that they personally witnessed Jesus alive, risen from the dead. This is why it's accepted as a historical fact.

Chuck Colson brings this idea home:

I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.

-Chuck Colson

If we reject the resurrection version of events, then we must come up with a more plausible alternative explanation for why thousands of Jews would overnight come to believe that a human being was the risen Son of God and then go out and die for their faith.

Once again, if it were made up, it's a horrible lie. It's not a productive lie. It doesn't sound plausible to it's audience.

Tim Keller, in a recommended resource for the series:

The claim that Jesus was Yahweh God who should receive worship, the notion of a crucified messiah, concept of individual resurrection, dullness of the disciples, the unsavory crowd that Jesus attracted -- these were highly embarrassing aspects of the Jesus story for early Christians. These went against the grain of both Greek and Hebrew worldviews and subjected early Christians to ridicule at best and abuse at worst. Christians had every incentive to play down or eliminate these issues from the gospel accounts, but instead they are prominent.

-Tim Keller

Apparent death theory -

These last ones we'll do quickly. Jesus didn't really die. He revived in the tomb and then was able to convince his followers he had resurrected.

This one just doesn't bear historical scrutiny. Saying a Roman soldier didn't actually kill a person they were tasked to kill is untenable. They were experts at torture and killing. They knew when a person was

dead. So did the people who took care of his dead body, wrapped him, buried him. When a powerful government sees someone as a threat and wants them dead, they are going to be dead. There won't be a mishap.

He was tortured so extensively, but you're saying he crawled out of the tomb, half dead and in need of medical attention and still convinced his followers he was gloriously raised from the dead? Nah.

Displaced body theory -

Someone came and moved the body and didn't tell anyone. But it doesn't explain his disciples claiming to have seen Jesus post resurrection. You have to account for all the evidence, all the facts, when trying to discredit this.

Hallucination theory -

People didn't really see the resurrected Jesus, they just hallucinated and thought they did. Maybe they had a bad trip or something. This requires a whole lot of leaps.

Not just once but many times.

Not just in one place but many places.

Not just one person but many people.

Not just individuals but groups.

Not just believers but unbelievers as well.

Also, in the ancient world, visions of dead people didn't mean a person was alive. It confirmed that the person was dead and had passed on to the afterlife.

Conclusion

At some point it becomes important to simply ask why we won't accept the answer given by the people who were actually there as to what happened? What is the best explanation of the facts?

Most of us have a naturalist worldview by default, but if last week we at least cracked the door open on the possibility that God exists, it is at least possible that He intervened in human history and raised Jesus from the dead.

And just as a quick, parting application for us all--the question we just answered changes the rubric through which we think about literally everything.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then live how you wish, eat drink and be merry, find what untestable religious ideology floats your boat if that's your thing, who cares anyway because when we burn up in the sun, none of this will matter.

But if he did rise from the dead? Then, he's God. And whatever he said about whatever he talked about is true and right, whether I like it or not.

You don't like the Bible's sexual ethics? Neither does anyone else in our culture. If He rose from the dead, then we have to consider that guy who proved he was God is right, and that maybe we're wrong

You don't like what Jesus says about money? Not many people do. But if he rose from the dead then we have to listen to him. Doesn't matter if you like it.

“But the church is full of hypocrites!” You’re totally right. But the good news is we’re not full--we still have room for you too. And if he rose from the dead that means he is able to forgive our hypocrisy and yours too.

“But church history is full of injustice!” Yes it is. And the resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of the day when sin, suffering and injustice will be no more.

“Yeah but I don’t like the ideas of wrath and hell.” Honestly I don’t either. If he rose from the dead and says there’s a hell, what am I gonna say? Yeah but I don’t like that idea so it isn’t true?

“Ok, this is crazy. What are we even talking about? Dead people don’t just rise from the dead.” I know, right?! That’s what this whole thing is about. One did.

Of course all of these things matter and need to be thoughtfully worked through, which we do all the time. But the point is, if Jesus rose from the dead, the extent to which these questions or doubts matter just absolutely plummets. It hits the floor.

If He is alive, then okay-- I’ll sit down, and I’ll listen to you. May that be the heart posture for all of us.