

Chapter #9

The Critical Importance of the Resurrection

In the last several chapters, we have been carefully building a case for the reliability of the Bible, because our goal in witnessing must always be to help unbelievers consider the Word of God. If we try to persuade unbelievers by our own wisdom, we'll only be frustrated in our efforts. The Bible is the final authority of the Christian faith. In it alone is found the way to eternal life and reconciliation with God. There is a power in God's Word that goes beyond human understanding. The Gideons in their ministry of disseminating Bibles throughout the world tell story after story of radical conversions resulting from the simple reading of the Bible—often without any explanation from another person. When an unbeliever reads God's Word with an open mind and heart, the Holy Spirit moves in his or her heart and brings conviction and repentance. The power isn't in the written words, but in the Living Word, Jesus Christ, who works through the written Word. Your words of human wisdom can't convince someone to become a Christian, but the cross of Christ can. It is only as we proclaim Jesus, as found in the Word of God, that others will be saved.

Isaiah 55:10-11 *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

1 Corinthians 1:17 *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

Since our goal is to bring the skeptic to the Bible, we first set out to prove that the Bible is a reliable historical document. Most people don't even realize that the Bible is credible even from a secular standpoint. If we apply the same test to the Bible that we do to any other piece of ancient literature, the Bible passes with flying colors. The manuscript evidence (bibliographic test) overwhelmingly confirms the accuracy with which the Bible was transmitted to the present day. The internal and external evidence tests confirm that the Bible is historically accurate and non-contradictory. This evidence alone proves the Bible is credible. It isn't fiction or fantasy but actual historical records of real events and their meanings. On the basis of this evidence, the Bible can't be simply dismissed. There is no rational reason to not consider its claims.

But we want to do more than simply prove the Bible is historical. Even if the unbeliever, through our evidence, acknowledges that the historical events are true, that doesn't necessarily make the interpretation of those events true. George Ladd, in his book *I Believe in the Resurrection of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975) states the problem like this. While you may be able to prove Jesus died, you can't prove He died *for your sins*. You might offer enough evidence to even prove Jesus rose from the dead, but you can't prove He rose *for our atonement*. We want the skeptic to accept the interpretation of the facts as recorded in the Bible, which means we need them to see the Bible as more than just a historical document. They need to realize it is God's Word. To do that, we looked at the uniqueness of the Bible to show it is not just like any other

book. Its influence and timelessness and message, etc. make it one of a kind. In our last chapter we examined the internal evidence for the inspiration of Scripture, concluding that the scientific, medical and prophetic information contained in it precludes it being of human origin. If, then, the Bible is indeed inspired by God, we can trust its interpretation of historical events. We can affirm that Jesus didn't just die on a cross because the Jewish leaders were threatened by His teachings. He wasn't just a political ploy. There was more involved than mere historical events. Folding back the curtain of heaven we see that God intended the crucifixion to be the payment for the sins of mankind.

2 Corinthians 5:21 *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Hebrews 2:14 *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—*

1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,*

2 Timothy 1:10 *but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*

We can't assume, however, that the skeptic will believe the interpretation of historical events just on the evidence of the inspiration of the Bible. But how do we convince them, then? How do we prove the doctrines of Christianity are true? For that matter, how do you prove any religion is true?

How can you prove the truth of a religion?

In the 20th century, a group of analytical philosophers put together a system for determining how we know something. This area of study is known as epistemology, the study of the nature and validity of knowledge. One of their conclusions, the verification principle, rocked the philosophical world. In a nutshell, the verification principle says that the only way to speak meaningfully about a truth claim (an assertion or statement) is to offer a way to prove or disprove it.¹ The analysts broke down all statements into 3 categories: analytic, synthetic and nonsense.

Analytic statements are considered true by definition and are usually the result of deductive logic. Mathematical concepts fall into this category as do definitions. A circle is round by definition, therefore it is an analytic statement. A dog is not a human is deductive logic based on accepted definitions, therefore it is analytic. Synthetic statements are dependent on inductive, rather than deductive, logic. A synthetic statement gathers evidence from the real world, tests it, and can be verified or falsified by it. Some synthetic statements would be, "John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement," "George Washington was the first president of the United States," etc. A synthetic statement doesn't have to be true, just testable in the real world.

The difference between deductive and inductive reasoning is very important. Deductive reasoning runs from the general to the specific, from known truths to their natural corollaries. Anyone who has ever suffered through a geometry class has learned the importance of analytic statements. "If A is true and B is true, then C is true" logic. That is deductive reasoning. And we use it regularly to balance our checkbooks and calculate our car's gas mileage. Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, runs from the specific to the general. Conclusions are drawn from a gathering of evidence. We use this logic every day with great confidence. Based on previous evidence, we're confident that our car will (or won't) start when we turn the key, we're reasonably sure that when we sit on our favorite chair, it won't collapse. We're equally sure that because the earth rotates on its axis at a constant speed, the sun will rise tomorrow morning. These are generalizations based on an accumulation of evidence. They are never absolutely true, only probably so. The best a synthetic statement can ever do is have a high degree of probability that it is true. Only analytic statements are absolutely true, because they are so by definition.

One way to help you understand the difference between these two types of logic is to apply them to the Bible. Deductive reasoning would look at a passage of Scripture and determine its meaning by what is already known to be true. For instance, we might say God answers prayer, I prayed, therefore, God will answer my prayer. In this case the logic is clear and the conclusion is probably valid. We say "probably" because the premises must be true in order for the conclusion to be true. It is debatable whether or not God answers every prayer. Deductive reasoning is susceptible to faulty or distorted logic. An inductive approach would be to

examine passages of Scripture concerning prayer and to make a conclusion based on that evidence: God answers the prayer of the righteous who ask with right motives and in faith. This conclusion is more precise because it is based on evidence, not preconceived truths. Inductive study is the preferred method of Bible study, even though inductive reasoning can only determine the probability of something being true.

I mentioned earlier that there are three types of statements. Now that we understand analytic and synthetic statements (based on deductive and inductive reasoning), what's left? Nonsense. That's right. The analytical philosophers categorized all other statements as nonsense. Not that such statements were unimportant or without merit, but as far as epistemology was concerned, if they weren't true by definition or able to be verified or falsified, they were nonsense. "I have Jesus in my heart," "God spoke to me this morning" and other statements we often make as Christians would be characterized as nonsense. Though they may be true, they are not provable.

So, how do we prove a religion to be true? Most religions are filled with "nonsense." They have no verifiable truth claims. The only way to prove a religion true is to find a synthetic statement on which the entire religion rests and to gather evidence to verify it. Christianity is the only religion that has such a truth claim — the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Why is the resurrection so important?

1. It is a verifiable truth claim.

Over the next couple chapters we'll be looking in depth at the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. Just a brief perusal of the books in a small library reveals dozens of books written on this one subject. It is important in our apologetic study first because it is a synthetic statement — it is verifiable in the real world. It is possible to prove it either true or false. This sets Christianity apart from all other religions. No other religion has a historical event at its center that can be proven.

"Christianity is the only belief-system in the world that rests its validity on the reality of certain events. If these events happened, then and only then does Christianity ask to be believed. And just how can a person test Christianity's truth claims? It's done exactly the same way you check out any statement or claim. You test the claim by examining the evidence for and against it and see if it holds up. Christianity doesn't ask for any special treatment."

2. It is the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ has always been the central issue. It was the primary focus of the disciples' teaching. Notice in the book of Acts how predominant the theme of the resurrection was in their preaching and decision-making.

Acts 1:21-22 *Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.*

Acts 2:31 *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 4:2 *They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*

Acts 4:33 *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.*

Acts 17:2-3 *As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said.*

Acts 17:18 *A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems*

to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Acts 17:31 *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*

Acts 26:22-23 *But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.*

ōFrom the first day of its divinely bestowed life, the Christian church has unitedly borne testimony to its faith in the Resurrection of Christ. It is what we may call one of the great fundamental doctrines and convictions of the church, and so penetrates the literature of the New Testament, that if you lifted out every passage in which a reference is made to the Resurrection, you would have a collection of writings so mutilated that what remained could not be understood. The Resurrection entered intimately into the life of the earliest Christians; the fact of it appears on their tombs, and in the drawings found on the walls of the catacombs; it entered deeply into Christian hymnology; it became one of the most vital themes of the great apologetic writings of the first four centuries; it was the theme constantly dwelt upon in the preaching of the ante-Nicene and post-Nicene period. It entered at once into the creedal formulae of the church; it is in our Apostles’ Creed; it is in all the great creeds that followed.

ōAll evidence of the New Testament goes to show that the burden of the good news or gospel was not -Follow this Teacher and do your best,øbut, -Jesus and the Resurrection.øYou cannot take that away from Christianity without radically altering its character and destroying its very identity.ø³

Why was the resurrection paramount in their teaching? Why didn’t they simply share the ethical teachings of a wise miracle-worker? Was it just because the resurrection was the greatest miracle they had ever seen? The reason is much deeper. It was the meaning of the resurrection that made it so significant.

Romans 8:33-34 *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*

Romans 6:5 *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

2 Corinthians 4:14 *because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.*

1 Peter 1:3 *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,*

Revelation 1:18 *I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

Paul made the message even clearer. He said in 1 Corinthians 15 that if there is no resurrection, the entire Christian faith is null and void.

1 Corinthians 15:14-18 *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.*

To prove a religion is true, you need a verifiable truth claim on which the entire religion rests. The resurrection is such a synthetic claim. Without it, Christianity, by its own admission, is null and void.

3. It is proof of Jesus' claims.

In Chapter 2 we looked briefly at some of the claims of Christianity. Jesus claimed to be equal with God, to be the way to the Father and to be the source of eternal life.

John 14:6 *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

John 3:18 *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

John 3:36 *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."*

John 8:24 *I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.*

John 10:30-33 *I and the Father are one.*

These are pretty strong claims for an ordinary Jew born in humble circumstances. How could Jesus make these claims? How could He expect anyone to believe them? Jesus almost always gave proof of the validity of His claims. In Matthew 9:2-6 He performed a miracle as proof that He had the authority to forgive sins. We noted several other passages in Chapter 1 where apologetic proof was offered to substantiate Jesus' claims. Jesus' ultimate miracle was His resurrection from the dead. He prophesied to His disciples that He would be killed and be raised to life on the third day.

Mark 8:31 *He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.*

Mark 9:31b *He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."*

Mark 10:33-34 *"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*

Luke 24:46 *He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,*

John 2:19 *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."*

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;*

ō...That Jesus said He was going up to Jerusalem to die is not so remarkable, though all the details He gave about that death, weeks and months before He died, are together a prophetic phenomenon. But when He said that He himself *would rise again from the dead*, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say, if he expected longer the devotion of any disciples, unless ô He was sure He was going to rise. No
founder of any world religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that!"⁴

If Jesus had simply died and not risen, all His claims would be invalid, especially in light of His claim to be able to conquer death. The Old Testament required 100% prophetic accuracy as proof that a prophet was from God. If Jesus had not risen, He would be a heretic deserving of only death. Everything hinges on the resurrection. It is the single most important doctrine of the Christian faith because it is the ultimate attestation to the truth

of everything Jesus taught. If He rose from the dead, He was everything He claimed to be and we can believe every word He said. If not, He was just an ethical teacher who had a lot of grand ideas with no substance to back them up.

How important is it to believe in a literal resurrection?

Many theologians and ministers today espouse a spiritual resurrection of Jesus instead of a physical one. Their rational minds cannot accept the possibility of a literal resurrection. But that's just the point. Jesus did something beyond comprehension. It was a miracle. If physical resurrections were everyday occurrences that therefore would be deemed rationally possible, there would be nothing unique about Jesus rising from the dead. If we claim Jesus only rose spiritually, then we are left again with a statement the analytical philosophers would term "nonsense." It would be impossible to prove a spiritual resurrection. Since the reason for the resurrection was to offer undeniable proof of Jesus's claims, what purpose would be served by a spiritual rather than a physical resurrection?

The fact stands that the Gospel writers testified to a physically risen Lord, one who ate breakfast with them by the Sea of Galilee, one who ate with them in the upper room, one whose hands and side could be physically touched by the doubting Thomas. Actually, if the resurrection were simply a fabrication, it would have been much easier for the disciples to claim a spiritual resurrection. That's what the Jews had always believed. They had no concept of a physical resurrection. No wonder the disciples were caught by surprise when Jesus rose from the dead — even though He had told them on numerous occasions that He would. They weren't thinking in physical terms. They doubted and had to be convinced of its reality. It was a literal, physical resurrection that convinced them and compelled them to share the message with the world with boldness and conviction.

To deny the literal resurrection of Jesus is to deny the empirical evidence offered in Scripture that people saw Him, touched Him, ate with Him. It is to relegate Christianity to the same status as any other religion — non-verifiable nonsense. It is to deny the central truth of the Christian faith.

How can we expect people to believe in something as unbelievable as the resurrection?

You can never convince a person of the resurrection of Christ who has already determined in his mind that there wasn't one. Yale archaeologist Millar Burrows noted, "The excessive skepticism of many liberal theologians stems not from a careful evaluation of the available data, but from an enormous predisposition against the supernatural." It is this predisposition against the supernatural that causes many to close their ears and eyes to the evidence. Using deductive logic, they believe it to be an analytic statement that the supernatural doesn't exist. The logical corollary therefore is that miracles are impossible, therefore Jesus couldn't have risen from the dead. And so they easily dismiss all of Christianity. Our goal is to help them to use inductive reasoning, to examine the evidence, before coming to a conclusion. If their minds are open to correct logic, they will find the evidence for the resurrection overwhelming. And if the resurrection is true, everything Jesus claimed is true, and Christianity is proven true.

End Notes

¹ Steven Collins, *Championing the Faith: A Layman's Guide to Proving Christianity's Claims* (Tulsa: Virgil Hensley Publishing Co., 1991), p. 35.

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² Ibid., p. 30.

³ Wilbur Smith quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 182.

⁴ Ibid., p. 183.

⁵ Ibid., p. 66.