

SERIES: Life After Death

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The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation stone in Christian doctrine. And it is rooted in historical fact. It can be investigated, it can be debated, it can be challenged, and it can be believed.

In 1987 a New Testament scholar by the name of Gary Habermas entered into a debate with a British atheist, probably at that time, the best known atheist in the world, by the name of Anthony Flew. The debate was judged by five philosophy professors from five different universities. At the end of the debate, four of the five philosophy professors agreed that Gary Habermas had overwhelmingly won the debate. One called it a draw. Nobody voted in favor of Anthony Flew. As a matter of fact, one of the philosophy professors at the end of the debate stated, "I was surprised -shocked might be a more accurate word - to see how weak Flew's own approach was. I was left with this conclusion: since the cause against the Resurrection was no stronger than what Anthony Flew presented, I think it would be time I began to take the Resurrection seriously.

In 1993 a New Testament scholar by the name of Bill Craig entered into a debate with an atheist put forth by the American Atheist Organization in the United States. They debated before 8,000 people; the audience was filled with agnostics, atheists, and skeptics. Yet when the debate concluded and people were polled, 82% indicated that Bill Craig and the defense for the Resurrection had overwhelmingly won. To the extent that in an audience of atheists, agnostics and skeptics, 47 of those people that night converted to Christianity because the evidence was so overwhelmingly true.

My point is this, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is not some mythical thing in the past that cannot be understood or investigated. It's something that when the facts are laid on the table, in my opinion, to deny the Resurrection of Jesus takes far more of a quantum leap of faith than it takes for us Christians to believe in the Resurrection, given the historical facts.

Over the years, there's been a number of theories that have been put forth to try to somehow explain away the Resurrection. Maybe Jesus just passed out. He swooned and in the tomb He revived himself, overpowered the guards and escaped. Or maybe the disciples stole the body and made up the story. Over and over, these theories have been debated and they have been exposed to be so ridiculously silly that today there are no real serious scholars that continue to promote these theories.

You say, well, okay, then let's think about another question. What if the apostles just gathered in a back room somewhere and made up the story and they wrote it down as if it was accurate history, but it was all just something they made up? Okay. That's a good question. Let's think about that. As a matter of fact, I want to give you six challenges to that idea.

Number one would be the level of detail in the Gospels. What I mean by that is if you're making up a story, you have to be really careful with the details. Every single Gospel writer identifies that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a person who we know was a historical figure in the Jewish Council in the first century. If you're going to make up a story, you don't identify the tomb, you leave it kind of mythical in general, so no one really knows. The eye witnesses to the event are named. As a matter of fact, several of those named, we know were skeptics before the crucifixion of Jesus and became believers after. If you're going to make up a story, you don't list skeptics as your eye witnesses to the event.

Over and over and over again through the Gospels, there is a very detailed account that could easily be investigated and challenged if it were not true. A second challenge to that idea would be the differing perspectives. Some people, some critics would say, you know that the Gospels don't seem to be an agreement on the details. Therefore, that proves that they probably didn't have the story right. Well, actually I'm very glad you brought that up because that discussion actually works in our favor. Any historian will tell you that if you go back to the records of history and you find multiple witnesses and they agree on every single detail of the account, it's pretty strong evidence that they gathered in a back room, made up the story and everybody got the details straight, because we know right up to today it just doesn't work that way. As a matter of fact, the idea that the writers had different perspectives and different details gives overwhelming evidence that they were four independent witnesses of the event.

Just to push this a little bit farther, Simon Greenleaf, a brilliant law professor at Harvard Law school, was asked to take the record of the four Gospels and to treat them as if they were witnesses on the witness stand and apply his science and see if the witnesses are credible. So, he did. His conclusion was that the four witnesses had enough differences in the secondary details. There's absolutely no question. They did not gather in a back room and make up the story. They are highly credible. But they also had complete agreement on the core facts recorded, which would indicate they all four were eye witnesses to some catastrophic event. His conclusion is they were highly credible as witnesses.

The third challenge to this idea that the story is just kind of made up or manufactured in a back room somewhere is the idea that the primary first witnesses were women. Now ladies, sorry to tell you, but in the first century there was such a low view of women that women were not considered to be credible to the extent that they were not even allowed to testify in a court of law because they could not be believed. Now, of course we don't agree with that assessment, but that was clearly the understanding in the first century. So, if you're going to gather in a back room and you're going to make up a story and you're going to try and promote this story, the last thing you would ever do is make your primary witnesses to the event women. Yet our text clearly indicates that the first witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus, were all women. There's only one reason the Gospel writers would record it that way and that is because that's the way it actually historically happened.

Number four would be the idea that all of the events recorded in the Gospels happened in the lifetime of those people who are eye witnesses to the event. Let's go back to the creed we discussed. The creed that Jesus was crucified, buried, rose from the dead and appeared to witnesses, was out and being proclaimed two years after the event itself. We know that Jerusalem was filled with antagonists, with skeptics, with people who wanted nothing more than to stop the movement of Jesus. If these facts were indeed untrue, there would have been

overwhelming evidence, an overwhelming response from the people who actually witnessed the events. But actually, that's not what happened at all. It was the exact opposite of that.

In Jerusalem itself, the place where these events took place, 40 days after the fact, Peter declared that Jesus was crucified, buried, rose again, and then he says, and you are eye witnesses to the fact, and the response of the people was that day over 3000 of these people converted to Christianity. How do you explain that? Other than they were eye witnesses to the empty tomb and knew it had to be true? In the next 30 to 60 days, there were over 10,000 people who chose to believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem alone. How could you possibly explain that other than having investigated the claims, they believed it was true?

The fifth challenge to that idea that this is just a story somebody made up would be the radical change in the Jewish people themselves. For 1500 years, their culture had defined them. That's what held them together as a people, but suddenly you have them meeting every day of the week. Suddenly you have them partaking of communion rather than the yearly Passover. Every historian would tell you there was a dramatic change coming out of Jerusalem. The only debate is what was the event that brought about the change? And the only plausible answer to that question has been that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

And lastly would be the fact that the disciples, the eye witnesses to the resurrected Jesus, were all willing to be persecuted and ultimately die for their belief. All except perhaps one, were ultimately executed for their faith. These apostles had nothing to gain by making up stories and everything to lose. Now you look at religious people today who are willing to die for their beliefs and you say, well, those people are willing to die for their beliefs, but it's not the same thing. Religious people willing to die for their beliefs today are dying for something they sincerely believe to be true, but they are not claiming to be eye witnesses to the core doctrines. Whereas the apostles were promoting a message that they were claiming to be eye witnesses to the resurrected Christ. If it was not true, then clearly they were the ones fabricating the story. Experts will tell us today, yes, people are willing to die for that which they believe to be true, but they simply will not die for that which they know is a lie. Yet every single one without exception went to their grave holding to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. No one recanted. No one changed his story. Which again, is overwhelming evidence, they did not gather in a back room and make up a story. They were willing to die for what they knew was true.

There is no question that the church did not create the Resurrection, but rather the Resurrection created the church. You say if that is true, then why is there so much disbelief in the world today? And the answer is because the world cannot cope with a risen Savior. As long as I can kind of have this religious thing that I do that makes me feel good, that makes no real demands on my life, I'm okay with that. But if it's true that Jesus really did rise from the dead, that demands something of me. I have to acknowledge He's God. I'm not. I have to acknowledge He's king. I'm not. If I truly believe that Jesus rose from the dead, I must surrender my will to His will, rather than running my own life. I must acknowledge that the Christian message is true. And there are many people in our world today who are simply unwilling to do so. They hide behind an intellectual smoke screen. But when you put the evidence on the table, it overwhelmingly supports from history that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

There may be those of you who consider yourselves to be skeptics and I completely respect your right to believe what you believe, but you must understand if, with integrity, you investigate the historical facts of the Resurrection, your choice to deny the Resurrection is a far greater leap of faith than the leap we make as Christians to believe it's true.

There's also gathered among us those who would agree with everything I said and came fully believing that Jesus rose from the dead. But if you were to be honest tomorrow morning, it makes no real difference. It's like believing that yes, this is a bomb, but let's just go on with the service as if it's not. What sense does that make? Your response is completely inconsistent with what you say you believe.

If Jesus rose from the dead, everything changes. Everything changes. Those of us that have embraced the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus believe that Jesus was God in flesh. We believe that Jesus was nailed to a cross in payment for the sins of the world. We believe that Jesus died on that cross because we owed a debt we couldn't pay, so Jesus paid a debt he didn't owe. We believe that Jesus died for us and we repent of our sins and we embrace the death of Jesus on the cross as payment for our sins. We believe that He was buried, and we believe that He rose again on the third day, that He appeared to witnesses and that He lives today. We believe that when we invite Jesus to be our Savior, He forgives our sins and it restores a relationship with Himself. That His power changes us from the inside out. It gives us meaning and purpose to life. It gives us hope even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances of life. And those of us that have embraced the risen Jesus would say as of that moment, our lives will never be the same again. The Resurrection of Jesus to us tomorrow morning makes all the difference.

Cara: Bryan, thanks for this message today. So, the numbers in Acts, I mean, I'm not great at math, but they do add up. 3000 people came to Christ at Pentecost, 30 to 60 days later about 10,000 people. That's pretty amazing. And we just need to add them up to get that picture.

Bryan: Yeah. You know, it's easy 2000 years later for skeptics to make all kinds of comments. But at some point you have to wrestle with historical fact that within Jerusalem, the place, not only of the Crucifixion, but of the Resurrection, thousands of people in a relatively dangerous culture pledge their faith in their belief in the resurrected Christ to the tune of over 10,000 people in a few months. Something happened that launched the church. And if it wasn't the Resurrection, then what was it?

Cara: Well, and even culturally, if you think about these are Jewish people who were steeped in their traditions and their ideas and thinking and to completely change that, it had to be something.

Bryan: Yeah, something dramatic.

Arnie: It would have to be huge, like a Resurrection.

Arnie: So I've heard people complain about differing accounts between the Gospels, but different doesn't necessarily mean conflicting. I mean a court case uses various eye witness accounts to substantiate evidence. Isn't that the case here Bryan?

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. The idea that the Gospels have different purposes, different focus, different perspectives. It doesn't mean they're contradictory, doesn't mean you have mistakes and

actually gives great credibility that you're reading eyewitness accounts of the details that are recorded.

Bryan: You know, you think about like later today if I get home and my wife says, well how did it go today? And I say, well, Arnie was there today in the studio and then Cara, you get home and Dan asked you a question. You say, oh, yeah, Arnie was there today. That isn't a contradiction there. Just two different questions, two different perspectives. But Paula may say, well, there were seven of us today in the studio. Well that there's just a different perspective with different names, but it doesn't mean anybody's statement was false. It's different perspectives. Yeah [They are All true.]. Yeah.

Arnie: So Bryan, how do you move forward with those people?

Bryan: So I think that's a great question. It's something we really need to think about. So you can't argue people into the Kingdom of God. And one of the things I look for, because I have a lot of these conversations, is if I give what I think is a reasonable answer and it doesn't matter, they just jump to the next question, It's evidence there's something else going on. There's something deeper. Maybe it's a hurt or a pain or disappointment, but at that point then the conversation changes a little bit.

Bryan: The other thing that I think is really important to remember is, I'm not trying to win an argument. I'm trying to win a soul. You know, there's times when somebody says something and I could come back with something really strong, but it would embarrass them. It might embarrass them in front of their friends. I'm not trying to win the argument that day and so I rethink how I'm going to respond in order to get something heard, in order that our conversation is a bit more productive. But I tend to think stay in the relationship in life has a way of getting people to rethink some things. And in those moments I want to be part of the conversation.