

Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

I recently read an account of a religious skeptic in 19th century England who proposed that over the front door of every church there should be placed a sign which reads, "Important if true." This article begins a short series on the important teaching of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the grave which Christians around the world celebrate on Easter Sunday morning. Teaching pertaining to our future bodily resurrection is given in several places in scripture (e.g. Job 19:25-26; Daniel 12:2), but 1 Corinthians 15 gives us the most extensive treatment of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament. My desire for this series is first, to touch on the biblical claims for Jesus' historical resurrection in the past. Second, what does the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean for our future? Lastly, how should the resurrection of Christ impact our lives in the present? As we begin I'll just note that if the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus in the 1st century is not true, then Christianity collapses under the weight of its own false claims. It's an important teaching and worthy of our consideration. Let's begin by looking at the resurrection as an historical event in the past as recorded in Holy Scripture.

Early in his first inspired letter to the church in Corinth, Paul stands firm on the importance of the message of Christ crucified. "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Following the crucifixion and burial of Jesus on Friday we learn that death could not hold him indefinitely and, on the third day, he rose from the grave. All of the gospel writers record that on Sunday, the tomb was empty. "And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things...be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31; see also Matthew 28:6). Luke records a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13ff). John also records a post-resurrection appearance of Christ to the disciples and his instruction to "feed my sheep" (John 21).

The apostle Peter focused on the resurrection in his sermon at Pentecost. In Acts 2:23-24 Peter said: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul goes so far as to name a host of people who saw the risen Christ including, Peter and the other disciples and "more than five hundred brothers at one time," some who were still alive when Paul penned this inspired letter. And Paul himself notes that Jesus appeared to him (Acts 9). This is not an event that happened in secret. Although there's an overwhelming amount of historical evidence for the resurrection there have always been skeptics.

There have been numerous theories put forth to try and disprove the resurrection. Some have claimed that the disciples of Jesus came and stole the body (Matthew 28:13). The, so called, 'swoon theory' claimed that Jesus was not really dead when he was placed in the tomb but had merely passed out. In the cool of the tomb he revived. Some have even sought to interpret the resurrection as merely a subjective experience. In other words, they say, "When

believers hear the word and then obey the word, the resurrection takes place in their hearts.” The Apostle Paul’s response to any of these claims is that anything other than the literal death and bodily resurrection of Jesus will not suffice. The entire Christian gospel rests squarely on the shoulders of the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day. In 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17 Paul writes, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain....And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless and you are still in your sins.” It could not be stated any more clearly than that.

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