

Can We Still Believe in the Resurrection Today?

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[0 : 0 0] to obey everything I've commanded you, and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. This is God's Word. So, if you have your Bibles open, we'll think about that Matthew text and also 1 Corinthians 15. So, we're working through the statements of the Apostles' Creed.

This time we come to that truth that we believe that the third day Jesus rose again from the dead. So, today the resurrection is on trial. I want to begin talking about a chap by the name of Simon Greenleaf, a really interesting character. He was one of the founders of the Harvard Law School back in the early 1800s. He was known in his day as a brilliant legal mind, has written some key documents and textbooks. And this guy in the 1840s decided to set about to disprove once and for all the gospel accounts of the resurrection. And he figured the best way to do that was to look closely at the text themselves. And his presumption, if we look closely at the gospel text, we'll see the inaccuracies, the errors, we'll come to understand that they cannot be trusted.

Well, by careful examination of the documents, the exact opposite happened. Greenleaf was surprised by his findings. He became a follower of the Lord Jesus. And in 1846, he wrote this document called *The Testimony of the Four Evangelists*. And it's a wonderful piece of writing, because he, as a lawyer, he uses the trial setting. So, he introduces in this document the four witnesses, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John, and he sets out lines of evidence. And he is confident by the end that he could prove the resurrection accounts are reliable in any court in the U.S. And it's a really interesting document, because he applies certain tests, he follows certain lines of evidence, so he talks about the test of honesty. He acknowledges that when you read the gospel accounts, they're very honest about their prior weaknesses, their struggles to understand what Jesus was talking about when he talked about dying and rising, their confusion and their fear and their disappointment, but also how after the resurrection, they'll testify boldly despite facing any number of terrors from enemies. So, the test of honesty was one that he used. He applied the test of reliability as well. So, sometimes, and maybe you've noticed this, you read the gospel accounts, and you'll notice that in one gospel there's two women mentioned, in another one there's three, sometimes there's one angel, sometimes there's two. And as a lawyer, Greenleaf says, that's not a problem. We expect eyewitness accounts to differ. In fact, it's a good sign that Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John didn't somehow conspire to cook up a story, and they all stuck to exactly the same lines of evidence. Greenleaf would go to a famous trial in his day, and he would point to ten big differences in eyewitness testimony that were delivered then, but nobody was questioning the integrity of the witnesses or of the trial itself.

He applied the test of experience, I think, in a really helpful way. So, he was writing at a time when there was guys like David Hume was about. You know, he rejected miracles. Many people rejecting miracles. You know, we can't observe them, therefore we can't trust them, therefore they can't happen.

[4 : 0 0] Greenleaf would apply the test of experience and humility and say, well, have I really experienced all there is to experience in the world? Can I really say I have absolute knowledge of everything in the world over all time and space? Do I really claim to have a superior knowledge to God, that I can say that the God who made the laws of nature is somehow bound by them?

He applied the test of contemporary facts. So, one reason when Greenleaf began to look into it as a skeptic, he said, well, I bet if I compare the gospel stories to the writings of Jewish historians or Roman historians, I'll find big differences. And actually, he found they agree that they show that they are teaching reliable history. So, Greenleaf is worth a read. It's online. How he begins his defense is telling.

He said, in examining the evidence of the Christian religion, it is essential to the discovery of truth that we bring to the investigation a mind freed as far as possible from existing prejudice. I think

that's maybe the challenge that we have, isn't it? So many people have already made their mind up. Can we still believe in the resurrection today? I guess the common belief already beginning to emerge in Greenleaf's Day, reason and science, well, that's based on facts. It's observable phenomena that can be trusted, whereas religion, well, that's based on faith. And especially often people talk about faith in a skeptical way. It's unobservable. David Hume is famous for his shiny big toe on the Royal Mile, and also famous for saying miracles can't happen. You know, to think about that claim, because that's the challenge, miracles can't happen full stop. To make that claim is to say, I have all knowledge.

I can see the whole story. I have an understanding of physical and spiritual realities. Here is truth. That's a big claim. And I think where Greenleaf and others are helpful is in the reminder that the resurrection, our belief in resurrection, is based on public truth. The events of Christianity are public events. The resurrection is an event recorded in history to those friendly to Christianity, enemies of Christianity, all recorded. So, we don't need to fear it being put on trial. Actually, in some ways, it'd be a wonderful thing if people were exploring, is the resurrection actually true? Because as we'll come to see, the resurrection is something that changes everything. But our faith is a reasonable faith.

[6 : 53] The reason for our faith is that we have confidence in the events that we read in the Gospels to which eyewitnesses are giving their testimony to. And those eyewitnesses then explain the significance of the resurrection for us. Think about the world of science. You know, I don't know anything much about science, but I know that they talk about things like the Copernican revolution. You know, Copernicus who discovered that the sun and not the earth is the center of the universe. Or folks like Pythagoras who came to understand that the earth is spherical rather than flat. You know, there are within science those moments where new information comes along and it overthrows and it challenges old beliefs.

And a new hypothesis needs to be formed. And that can be a challenge because we have pre-existing data, we have pre-existing beliefs, and we don't easily shift from that. But we need to allow new and true information to reshape how we see things. That's true in science, that's true in general knowledge, and it's also true in religion. Because the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is a huge revolution in religion. Here is Jesus, and He announces that He is God. He reveals in His person the glory of God. He dies in the place of sinners. He rises in victory. And these public events of the ministry of Jesus are attested to by friends and enemies alike. And they're so significant that we need to allow those events to shape and to reshape us.

So, we're going to do two things together. We're going to consider some lines of evidence for the resurrection from Matthew 28. And we're going to consider, more briefly, why the resurrection matters. And we're going to use 1 Corinthians 15, which is a very early document. So, as we begin, with Simon Greenleaf's urgings in our minds, let's keep an open mind. Let's encourage in ourselves and others careful examination of the evidence, because it's vital for faith. Can we believe in the resurrection?

In Matthew 28. So, what we have, just by way of reminder, when we read Matthew's gospel, we have eyewitness testimony written perhaps a generation after the events. Not a myth. People could be questioned. We're going to notice four different lines of evidence. There are many more we could pursue, but from Matthew we'll look at four. The first line of evidence, and it's a huge one, is that of the empty tomb. So, back in Matthew 28, verse 5, we have an angel say to the women, do not be afraid, for I know that you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen. Just as He said, come and see the place where He lay. Now, one thing that Matthew makes clear, along with the other gospel writers, is that everybody knew where the tomb of Jesus was.

[10 : 31] The Roman soldiers were there on guard, they certainly knew, and the women were watching as Jesus was placed in the tomb. They knew, the Jews knew where Jesus' body lay. Nobody ever claims that these women, these first disciples, went to the wrong tomb. So, there is an empty tomb that needs to be explained. And what is also clear is that the enemies of Jesus couldn't ever, didn't ever produce a dead body. When they had all the power of the Roman Empire at their disposal, all the resources of the Jewish religious system determined to get rid of Jesus and His followers, they could have stopped Christianity dead in their tracks simply by tracking down a dead body. But they couldn't.

And we know that producing a dead body would have stopped Christianity in His tracks, because before the resurrection, the disciples were filled with grief and despair. They thought it was the end.

There would be no Christianity without a risen Lord Jesus. So, we hear today, well, the resurrection is impossible.

We have to be careful, as C.S. Lewis speaks about, of chronological snobbery. If a resurrection isn't possible, why was no dead body ever produced? How do we explain the empty tomb? The question to ask is which evidence seems more likely that are two different stories recorded here in Matthew 28.

Now, I've recently read Tom Holland's book, *Dynasty*, which is all about Caesar and the Roman Empire, and there is a picture there of Roman soldiers in centuries B.C. and early A.D., of incredibly dedicated and courageous and loyal, responsible largely for taking over huge areas of the world.

[12:37] Now, we have to ask ourselves the question, which story seems more plausible? Was there a violent earthquake as an indication of the activity of God, that an angel came and rolled the stone and caused this supernatural fear to fall on these soldiers, or were the soldiers somehow overpowered by a group of grief-filled women, who, while the Roman soldiers were charged with keeping watch, they were able to roll away a huge stone and break the Roman seal and take a body away, when actually a dead body would be of no value to the disciples anyway?

Matthew records truth. The tomb is empty because Jesus has risen.

And that follows to the second line of evidence, which is that of fulfilled prophecy. To go back to verse 6 of Matthew 28, we read, He is not here. He has risen, just as He said. So, it's suggested sometimes that resurrection was a late invention by the New Testament church, wanting to gain a following for Jesus, wanting to establish this new religion, something perhaps in the second century, they cooked up this idea that Jesus rose from the dead. It doesn't square with what we have in God's Word. Rather, what we have in God's Word is an understanding that even in the Old Testament, there is the prophetic announcement that the Messiah would rise again. So, just a few minutes ago, we read, we sang Psalm 16.

The apostles very quickly understood that while David was absolutely dead and buried, he was speaking prophetically of a greater king still to come. He was speaking of Jesus, who died and then rose.

Now, we can go back to Isaiah chapter 53 and verse 10. We thought about this last week in Isaiah 53. We have this. It was the Lord's will to crush it. Sorry, verse 9, He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer.

[15:22] And though the Lord makes His life an offering for sin, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. After He has suffered, He will see the light of life and be satisfied. So, we have in the Old Testament these anticipations that the Messiah will die and rise. But more than that, we also have Jesus' own words. So, the angels say, as He said, as Jesus said.

We have Jesus predicting many times His suffering, His death, and His resurrection. Jesus goes through His ministry with a self-conscious knowledge of His destiny. He will die on the cross to pay the price and penalty for sin and for sinners, and He'll be risen in glory and victory.

So, while the disciples, before the resurrection, they couldn't understand, and they were filled with grief and they think, this sounds like defeat and disaster. Jesus knew this was the plan of God. Even His enemies know that Jesus spoke of resurrection. So, Matthew 27 and verse 63, this is what the Pharisees say to Pilate. Sir, we remember that while He was still alive, that deceiver said, after three days, I will rise again. That's why the soldiers were keeping guard over the tomb. The empty tomb. The risen Lord Jesus says God's plan is fulfilled. The third line of evidence is that of the encounters with the risen Jesus that we read of. So, here we read of two.

In verse 9, suddenly Jesus met the women hurrying from the tomb. Greetings, He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet, and worshipped Him. And Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me. Verse 16, the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted.

[17:38] Now, in 1 Corinthians 15, we are told that for 40 days, book of Acts, 40 days, the disciples would meet with the risen Jesus. Sometimes it would be small groups, like these women. Larger groups, like the disciples. Sometimes up to 500 at one time, as we're told in 1 Corinthians 15. Even appearing to His skeptical half-brothers to turn them into followers of Jesus and worshipers of Him as God.

And to read accounts like this one that Matthew records for us of these eyewitnesses, we begin to recognize there's a ring of truth to them. It's been widely recognized that if someone was writing a gospel looking to establish credibility for it, the first eyewitnesses to the risen Lord Jesus that you would choose wouldn't be women.

First century, low value, their word not recognized in a court of law. But that's what's recorded by the gospel writers. Why? Because that's how it happened. Did you notice as well the honesty in the record?

In verse 8, we have the women afraid and filled with joy and worshiping. In verse 17, we have worship and we have doubt. What we are being presented with here are real people processing an event that they never saw coming, an event with life-changing implications. In the first century, they knew as well as we do that dead men stay dead. But now they are discovering that Jesus is alive. And so, they're working through all these emotions and they're beginning to recognize, well, this is evidence that Jesus is God and we need to worship. And remember that the Matthew who writes his gospel was there on the mountain. He saw Jesus. Our faith is an eyewitness testimony to the Jesus that Matthew saw, the Jesus that Matthew worshipped, and then wrote down his account for us.

The fourth line of evidence that we have in Matthew 28 to consider when we ask the question, can we believe in the resurrection? It's about the global church. The question is asked, how do we explain the global church? Verse 18, Jesus came to them and said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

[20 : 36] And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. How do we explain a phenomena where we find a handful of believers in the Lord Jesus gathered in fear in the early hours of Easter Sunday to a room of 120, 40 or so days later, around the time when Jesus returns to heaven, to the reality today that approximately 2 billion people identify as Christians, where hundreds of millions of people are worshipping Jesus today? And the only explanation that makes sense is that the church is formed by the risen Christ who sends His Spirit. It's the ongoing work of the risen Lord Jesus that's cutting across history and cultures and continents and languages that enables the church to grow despite persecution, hatred, and attack. It's the real testimony of real Christians. I know that my Redeemer lives.

We enjoy real fellowship with God. This isn't made up. This is reality. We know that He is with us and will never leave us. And so we have this phenomena of the church.

We have the phenomena of knowing our God by personal experience that again is evidence to believe in the resurrection. Can we believe it's true? Matthew's eyewitness account says absolutely we can.

The gospel record stands up to examination. Simon Greenleaf is not the only skeptic who set about to disprove the faith and became a believer. For a more contemporary reads, anything by Lee Strobel, the Chicago journalist who became a follower of Jesus, examining the case for Christ. You can listen to guys like J. Warner Wallace or William Lane Craig. There's loads of guys who speak about the reliability, the credibility of the resurrection. And it's good for us to know that we have good reason for our faith. And actually, as Christians, we want the resurrection to be on trial.

[23 : 23] We don't want people to dismiss it as being unhistorical and therefore unimportant. We would love, wouldn't it, for our friends and our family to be thinking deeply and to be open to truth. Because it's not just a fact of history, which might fascinate. It's a truth. A truth that transforms our destiny. And that's where we're going to go next.

We're going to think about 1 Corinthians 15 and why does the resurrection matter. So, if you have your Bible, you can turn with me to 1 Corinthians 15 for a few moments. One of the things I think is really sad when it comes to discussions about the resurrection is that challenges to the reliability of the physical resurrection of Jesus, they don't just come from outside of the church. Actually, they come from inside the church too. And you will find branches of the Christian church of liberal theology that want to say, well, Jesus didn't physically rise. The church did create a myth, but Jesus can still be alive in my heart, can be alive in my experience. Does that work? Would that transform a life? Would that change a world if it was all just a myth? And I think, again, that's where it's important that we remember we have evidence to say, this is not me. We have manuscript evidence. One of the great things about modern science has been a great advance in dating

techniques. Not relationship dating, but the dating of documents, let's just be clear on that. There are thousands of documents, thousands of fragments, New Testament fragments, New Testament letters, entire books that can all be dated to the first century AD. Again, simply to say there is no time there for a myth to develop.

J.I. Packer wrote of that idea, you know, is it enough that Jesus is alive in our hearts if He's not physically alive? J.I. Packer says, the Jesus of the Gospels can still be your hero, but He cannot be your Savior if He did not rise. We need this to be truth, not just a nice story we tell ourselves. So, 1 Corinthians 15 is a really important document for lots of reasons. It's really important, again, because we can go to verse 3 and hear echoes of a creed for what I received that I passed on to you as of first importance, and we discover that the earliest church is passing on these basic truths that Jesus died, that He was buried, and that He rose again. So, even before 1

Corinthians is written, and it's written maybe 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in that gap there is this creed that has developed. There is no myth going on here. Christians are living and dying, declaring, Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus rose from the dead. Now, the section we're going to look at just for a few minutes, it deals with, and deals head on, I think, with that question, is the resurrection just a myth? Does it matter? We're going to be at verses 12 to 19. It's that section where Paul uses negative reasoning. He says, you know, if Christ is not raised, then all these things are not true. What we're going to do, we're going to hear that, but we'll also flip it to hear the positive, because Jesus is alive, certain things are wonderfully true. The first place we're going to go is, let's just start reading in verse 12. If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? So, there's the challenge.

[27 : 34] It's not a 21st century thing, it's a first century thing. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised, verse 14, and if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless. So, there's the negative. Christ is not raised, the preaching of the apostles is useless. Positively, because Christ has been raised, the preaching of the apostles is powerful and useful and true. This is Paul who is writing, Paul who turned from being an enemy of Jesus to a follower and apostle of Jesus because he met the risen Jesus, becomes an eyewitness, one of the most unlikely people to be converted, but he's saved by grace, and his preaching from that point on would focus on the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. His good news that he brings to the world needs both. It needs Jesus' death as sacrifice, as substitute to atone for sin, but it needs the resurrection. It needs the evidence that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice, that God raised him in glory, that God vindicated him. It needs the resurrection so that we can trust Jesus and his words, because after all Jesus said he would rise again, we need the resurrection in the preaching of Paul so that we can understand that in Jesus, trusting in him, we can know God personally. The resurrection matters for the good news that Paul then and the church today preaches. Connected to that, Paul went on to say in verse 14, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. Verse 17, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. Put that around because Christ has been raised, your faith is real. It's not a waste. The call to faith that we hear in God's Word is the call to receive and to trust and to believe in Jesus as he is offered to us in the gospel. And the gospel is a declaration that Jesus both died for us and rose for us. The gospel is only good news because Jesus is alive and has power to save. And remember, this is not a call to blind faith.

This is a call to reasonable faith, logical faith in light of evidence presented in God's Word by eyewitnesses. And more than that, it is faith with a definite object in view. Who is our faith in? Our faith is in Jesus, who is the Son of God, who made God and his glory visible, who brings salvation. Because Christ is alive, our faith is alive. Because Christ has been raised, we can be forgiven. Hear how Paul states it negatively, verse 17, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. You are still in your sins.

The significance of the cross of Jesus is that God provided his Son to be our sacrifice. The cross is God's answer to the human problem of sin. Jesus, the Son of God, becomes one of us, becomes the sin bearer, becomes our substitute bearing our sin and its punishment in his body. That's wonderful news, that it needs the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that God accepted that sacrifice.

That we can now have confidence that the price has been paid in full. That sin and death have been defeated by the sinless Son of God. That in Christ there is real freedom from those forces that hold us in chains. When our faith is in the risen Lord Jesus, we have this wonderful confidence as the

people of God, that in God's court, when we stand in God's presence, we know we will not be condemned. Why?

Because Jesus has been condemned for us. He has taken the full penalty. God will not demand from us what has already been paid for us by Jesus. We are united to our risen Lord Jesus, the one who has paid for our sin, now pleads our cause in heaven on the basis of that perfect sacrifice. So, we know, the verdict is already in. Now we can live knowing we are as loved and accepted by God our Father, just as much as He loves and accepts His Son, Jesus. The risen Lord Jesus secures our forgiveness.

[33 : 02] And because Christ has been raised, we have living hope. And the negative, it sounds desperate. If Christ has not been raised, verse 18, then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitiful. Without a risen Lord Jesus, if this is all just a myth, all the effort, all the obedience, all the suffering, all the sacrifice that we make for our Lord and Savior would be a waste of time.

It would be a tragedy. But since and because Jesus is alive, listen to what Paul says in verse 58, therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

We know that we have a hope that is alive because we have a Savior who is alive. Trials and suffering are temporary. Reward is eternal. We have real, living, future hope. The Jesus who rose from the dead on the third day and then ascended to heaven, He will come back again. He'll come back and everyone will see Him in all His glory. And He will defeat and deal with sin and death and darkness and evil once and for all. And He will establish His kingdom here on this earth. He will renew this earth. He will renew His people. We will live with Him. We will enjoy God with us in a world made perfect, free of sadness and sin, free of darkness, free of death, a world of perfect love that will never end with our risen Savior. We need the resurrection in our faith. It gives us joy. It gives us hope. It gives us confidence. It gives us love. That's why the resurrection matters. As we close, hopefully we find some help in some of the evidence that Matthew records for us. Hopefully, you've heard some of the significance of the resurrection to our faith. Let me leave you with another statement from Simon Greenleaf at his trial of the gospel writers. He says, a person who rejects Christ may choose to say that I do not accept it. He may not choose to say there is not enough evidence. We have evidence, evidence that leads us to consider the significance of Jesus. May it be true for us, may it be true for others, that our lives are characterized by joyful, hopeful worship because we know the risen Lord Jesus. Let's pray together.

He■■■ close. Amen. Thank you.■■■ Bennu L