

# Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?

Discover the Evidence  
and Decide for Yourself ...

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# Is There Evidence for the Resurrection?

According to eyewitnesses, a man named Jesus Christ demonstrated his power over death. They tell us that after he died on the cross and was buried, Jesus suddenly appeared to them alive on the third day. Then he was seen by other followers, including 500 people on a single occasion.

Soon word spread everywhere that Jesus had risen from the dead. But could Jesus' resurrection simply be a 2000-year-old legend? Or is it based on verifiable historical evidence?

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then the foundation for the Christian Faith would forever be destroyed.

## Jesus Predicts His Own Death and Resurrection

Seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah had written about a future Messiah, who would suffer and die for our sins, but later be restored to life.

Echoing the prophecy in Isaiah 53, Jesus claimed that he was the Messiah who would be betrayed, arrested, condemned, spit upon, scourged, and killed. But then three days later he would come back to life. (See Mark 10:33).

Everything Jesus taught and claimed depended on his resurrection from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise as he promised, his message of forgiveness and hope for eternal life would be meaningless. Jesus was putting his words to the ultimate test of truth.

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith explains, "When He said He 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 the devotion of any disciples – unless He was sure He was going to rise."<sup>1</sup>

So what happened?

## A Horrific Death And Then . . . ?

Exactly as Jesus predicted, eyewitnesses report he was betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot. Then in a mock trial under the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, he was condemned, scourged, kicked, spat upon, brutally whipped, and finally crucified on a wooden cross.

Jesus suffered on the cross for approximately six hours. Then, at 3:00 in the afternoon, Jesus cried out, "It is finished" and died.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly the sky went dark and an earthquake shook the land.<sup>3</sup>

Pilate wanted to verify that Jesus was dead before allowing his crucified body to be buried. So, a Roman guard thrust a spear into Jesus' side. The mixture of blood and water that flowed out, according to eyewitnesses, was a clear indication that Jesus was dead. Once his death was certified, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, tightly wrapped in linen, and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Roman guards then sealed the tomb with a large stone and were under strict orders to watch the tomb 24 hours a day.

Jesus' disciples were so utterly devastated by his death on the cross that they fled for their lives, fearing they too would be captured and killed. But then something happened . . .

According to a *New York Times* article,

"Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened ... But exactly what?"<sup>4</sup>

## A Skeptic Examines the Evidence

English journalist Frank Morison believed Jesus' resurrection was mythical and began research for a book proving his case. Morison wanted to know what actually happened that changed Jesus' followers and started a movement that has made such a profound impact on our world.

He realized there were five possible explanations:

1. Jesus didn't really die on the cross.
2. Jesus' body was stolen.
3. The disciples were hallucinating.
4. The account is legendary. Or,
5. It really happened.

Morison began examining the facts patiently and impartially to see where they would lead him.

## 1. Was Jesus Dead?

Morison first wanted verification that Jesus was really dead when placed in the tomb. He learned that Jesus' death was considered factual for nearly 1800 years. Then about 200 years ago, a few skeptics postulated that Jesus didn't die on the cross, but merely lost consciousness, and was revived by the cool, damp air of the tomb. This became known as the "swoon theory."

Morison wondered if Jesus could have survived the cross. He researched both Jewish and Roman contemporary history and discovered the following facts supporting Jesus' death:

- All the accounts affirm he died.
- Pilate verified he died.
- During the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, no one disputes his death.
- Secular and contemporary historians, Lucian<sup>5</sup>, Josephus<sup>6</sup>, and Tacitus<sup>7</sup> cite his death as factual.

Morison became convinced that Jesus was truly dead, a fact almost universally accepted as true by trusted scholars and historians.

Morison concludes, "That Jesus Christ died on the cross, in the full physical sense of the term...seems to me to be one of the certainties of history."<sup>8</sup>

But maybe Jesus' body was stolen?

## 2. Was Jesus' body stolen?

Morison wondered if the disciples faked the resurrection story by stealing Jesus' body, and then claiming he was alive. That might be plausible if the tomb was in an obscure area where no one would see them.

However, the tomb belonged to a well-known member of the Sanhedrin Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Since Joseph's tomb was at a well-known location and easily identifiable, any thoughts of Jesus being "lost in the graveyard" would need to be dismissed.

Not only was the location well known, but the Romans had assigned guards to watch the tomb 24 hours a day. This was a trained guard unit comprised of four to 16 soldiers.

Former atheist and skeptic Josh McDowell spent more than seven hundred hours researching the evidence for the resurrection. McDowell notes, "The

Roman Guard unit was committed to discipline and they feared failure in any way.”<sup>9</sup> It would have been impossible for anyone to have slipped by the guards unnoticed and then moved the stone. Yet the stone was rolled away, making it possible for eyewitnesses to enter the tomb. And when they did, the body of Jesus was missing.

If Jesus’ body was anywhere to be found, his enemies would have quickly exposed the resurrection as a fraud. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, summarizes the strength of this argument:

“With an event so well publicized, don’t you think that it’s reasonable that one historian, one eyewitness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ’s body? ... The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.”<sup>10</sup>

So, with no body of evidence, and with a known tomb clearly empty, Morison accepted that Jesus’ body had somehow disappeared from the tomb.

Perhaps the disciples were just hallucinating and only thought they saw Jesus?

### 3. Were the Disciples Hallucinating?

Morison wondered if the disciples might have been so emotionally distraught that they hallucinated and imagined Jesus’ resurrection.

Psychologist Gary Collins, former president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, explains that “Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature, only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren’t something which can be seen by a group of people.”<sup>11</sup>

Hallucination is not even a remote possibility, according to psychologist Thomas J. Thorburn. “It is absolutely inconceivable that ... five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind ... should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions – visual, auditory, tactual – and that all these ... experiences should rest entirely upon ... hallucination.”<sup>12</sup>

The hallucination theory, then, appears to be another dead end. What else could explain away the resurrection?

## 4. Is it just a Legend?

Some unconvinced skeptics attribute the resurrection story to a legend that began with one or more persons lying or thinking they saw the resurrected Jesus. Over time, the legend would have grown and been embellished as it was passed on. But there are three major problems with that theory.

1. Legends simply don't develop while multiple eyewitnesses are alive to refute them. One historian of ancient Rome and Greece, A. N. Sherwin-White, argued that the resurrection news spread too soon and too quickly for it to have been a legend.<sup>13</sup> Even skeptical scholars admit that Christian hymns and creeds were recited in early churches within two to three years of Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>14</sup>
2. Legends develop by oral tradition and are not supported by contemporary historical documents. Yet the Gospels were written within three decades of the resurrection.<sup>15</sup>
3. The legend theory doesn't adequately explain either the empty tomb or the fervent conviction of the apostles that Jesus was alive.<sup>16</sup>

Morison's original assumption that the resurrection account was mythical or legendary didn't coincide with the facts.

So what really happened?

## 5. Did the resurrection really happen?

Having eliminated the main arguments against Jesus' resurrection due to their inconsistency with the facts, Morison began asking himself, "Did it really happen?" Instead of looking for evidence against Jesus' resurrection, he wondered how strong the case was for its actual occurrence. Several facts stood out.

### Women First

Each eyewitness account reports that Jesus suddenly appeared bodily to his followers, the women first. Morison wondered why conspirators would make women central to the plot. In the first century, women had virtually no rights, personhood, or status. Morison reasoned that conspirators would have portrayed men, not women, as the first to see Jesus alive. And yet we read that women touched him, spoke with him, and were the first to find the empty tomb.



## Multiple Eyewitnesses

The disciples claim they saw Jesus on more than ten separate occasions. They say he showed them his hands and feet and told them to touch him. He ate with them and later, on one occasion, appeared alive to more than 500 followers.

In Caesarea, Peter told a crowd why he and the other disciples were so convinced Jesus was alive.

“We apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, but God raised him to life three days later ... We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”<sup>17</sup>

Morison realized that these early sightings of a risen Jesus by so many of his followers would have been virtually impossible to fake.

Then what else could have happened?

## Consistent to the End

As Morison continued his investigation, he began to examine the motives of Jesus’ followers. He reasoned that something extraordinary must have happened, because the followers of Jesus ceased mourning, ceased hiding, and began fearlessly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive.

As if the eyewitness reports were not enough to challenge Morison’s skepticism, he was also baffled by the disciples’ behavior. These eleven former cowards were suddenly willing to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. All but one of Jesus’ disciples were slain as martyrs. If they had taken the body, would they have sacrificed so much for a lie? Something happened that changed everything for these men and women.

It was this significant fact that persuaded Morison the resurrection must have really happened. He acknowledged, “Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that cannot be explained away ... This fact is that ... a profound conviction came to the little group of people — a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave.”<sup>18</sup>

Professor J. N. D. Anderson and author of *Evidence for the Resurrection* concurs, “Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later

transformed into a company that no persecution could silence — and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication ... That simply wouldn't make sense.”<sup>19</sup>

## Why Did It Win?

Finally, Morison was bewildered by the fact that “a tiny insignificant movement was able to prevail over the cunning grip of the Jewish establishment, as well as the might of Rome. He explains,

“Within twenty years, the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church... In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire. When we have said everything that can be said... we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. Why did it win?”<sup>20</sup>

By all rights, if there were no resurrection, Christianity should have died out at the cross when the disciples fled for their lives. But the apostles went on to establish a growing Christian movement.

Whatever one believes about the validity of Jesus' resurrection, clearly “*something happened*” after his death that has made a lasting impact on our world. When world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, the non-Christian scholar replied, “By this test Jesus stands first.”<sup>21</sup>

What is that legacy? Let's look at just some of Jesus' impact:

- Time is marked by his birth, B.C. (before Christ); A.D. (*anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord).
- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person.
- About 100 great universities were established to spread his teaching — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford.<sup>22</sup>
- Jesus' teaching that all people are created equal laid the bedrock for human rights and democracy in more than 100 countries.<sup>23</sup>
- The high value Jesus placed on each person regardless of sex or race led his followers to promote the rights of women as well as abolish slavery.
- Humanitarian works such as the World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Mercy Ships, and the Salvation Army were founded by his followers.

## A Surprise Conclusion

In a reversal of his skepticism, Morison changed the title of his book to, *Who Moved the Stone*, which documents the evidence that persuaded him the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a true historical event.

Another scholar who wrote about evidence for Jesus' resurrection was Dr. Simon Greenleaf, founder of the Harvard Law School. Greenleaf wrote the rules of evidence still used in our legal system today. Applying those rules to the events surrounding Jesus' death, Greenleaf concluded that any honest jury would render a verdict that Jesus' resurrection really happened. As with Morison, it was the sudden change in the disciples' behavior that persuaded him. He writes,

*"It would have been impossible for the disciples to persist with their conviction that Jesus had risen if they hadn't actually seen the risen Christ."*<sup>24</sup>

Jesus' resurrection convinced his disciples that he was the Messiah who had died for our sins. He was "the only way to God," and "the resurrection and the life."

They now knew Jesus alone had the power over life and death, and they gave their lives proclaiming him as the risen Lord.

Although he was originally a skeptic, Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis explains how Jesus' resurrection was unique among all events in human history.

*"Something perfectly new in the history of the Universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The door which had always been locked had for the first time been forced open."*<sup>25</sup>

# What Does Jesus' Resurrection Mean to You Today?

The apostle Paul, who had also initially been a skeptic of Jesus' resurrection, explains its impact on our lives.

*"For Christ has completely abolished death, and has now, through the Gospel, opened to us men the shining possibilities of the life that is eternal."*

—2 Timothy 1:10, Phillips

In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection opened the door for us to have eternal life with Christ. But there is an obstacle preventing us from going to heaven. The apostle Paul explains.

*"You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions..."* —Colossians 1:21, NLT

The obstacle to us having eternal life with Christ is that we have sinned and rebelled against a holy God. Although God loves us beyond our understanding, his perfect justice requires payment for our sins. The penalty is death.

Many wonder why an all-powerful, loving God can't just forgive us without punishing us for our sins. Why does he demand justice?

Imagine entering a courtroom and you are guilty of murder. As you approach the bench, you realize that the judge is your father. Knowing that he loves you, you immediately begin to plead, "Dad, just let me go!"

With tears in his eyes he responds, "I love you, son, but I'm a judge. I can't simply let you go."

Presenting the evidence against you, he bangs the gavel down and declares you guilty. Justice cannot be compromised, at least not by a judge. But because he loves you, he steps down from the bench, takes off the robe, and offers to pay the penalty for you. And in fact, he takes your place in the electric chair.

This is the picture painted by the New Testament. God stepped down into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, and was crucified on the cross for us. Jesus is not a third-party whipping boy being punished for our sins, but

rather he is God himself. Stated more bluntly, God had two choices: to punish us for our sin, or to receive the punishment himself. In Christ, he decided to pay the penalty for us.

In other words, God's perfect justice is completely satisfied by the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. All of our sins—no matter how bad they are or have been—are completely paid for by the blood of Christ. Paul writes,

*"...yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault."* —Colossians 1:22, NLT

But wait a minute, you say, "Don't I have to do good deeds to get into heaven?"

**"Don't I have to do good deeds to get into heaven?"**

Since eternal life is a gift from God, you and I can't do anything to earn our way into heaven. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, explains God's amazing grace.

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*  
—Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV

For a gift to be ours, we need to actually receive it. Like any gift, you can choose to accept or reject Jesus Christ's pardon for the penalty for your sins. This was made clear by the apostle John.

*"This is what God told us: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life, but whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."* —1 John 5:11-12, NCV

To become a Christian, you must place your faith in Jesus' death for your sins on the cross, and trust in His resurrection for your eternal life. It is a choice that you alone must make. No one else can do it for you.

You must honestly admit you have sinned and want the forgiveness Jesus Christ offers you. The apostle John tells us that,

*"If we freely admit that we have sinned, we find God utterly reliable . . . he forgives our sins and makes us thoroughly clean from all that is evil."*

—1 John 1:9, Phillips

John tells us that whoever receives Jesus Christ becomes his child.

*“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” —John 1:12, NIV*

You can receive Jesus right now by asking him to come into your life and forgive your sins.

If you haven't ever invited Jesus into your life, simply pray the following words. But remember, it's not the words you say but the attitude of your heart that is important.

***“Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for all my sins—past, present, and future. Thank you for giving me eternal life. I receive you as my Savior by faith and desire you to be Lord of my life. Make me the kind of person you want me to be.”***

If you have made this commitment to Jesus Christ, he actually entered your life. He will help you to become the brand-new person he created you to be. He is freeing you to experience a life of meaning, purpose, and power.

And there's even more. . .

# Endnotes

1. Wilbur M. Smith, *A Great Certainty in This Hour of World Crises* (Wheaton, ILL: Van Kampen Press, 1951), 10, 11.
2. The Aramaic word Jesus uttered, *tetelestai*, is an accounting term meaning “debt paid in full,” referring to the debt of our sins.
3. Historian Will Durant reported, “About the middle of this first century a pagan named Thallus ... argued that the abnormal darkness alleged to have accompanied the death of Christ was a purely natural phenomenon and coincidence; the argument took the existence of Christ for granted. The denial of that existence never seems to have occurred even to the bitterest gentile or Jewish opponents of nascent Christianity.” Will Durant, “Caesar and Christ,” vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 555.
4. Peter Steinfeld, “Jesus Died – And Then What Happened?” *New York Times*, April 3, 1988, E9.
5. Lucian, Peregrinus Proteus. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 2.
6. Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 63, 64. [Although portions of Josephus’ comments about Jesus have been disputed, this reference to Pilate condemning him to the cross is deemed authentic by virtually all leading scholars.]
7. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 44. In *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. By Robert Maynard Hutchins, Vol. 15, *The Annals and The Histories by Cornelius Tacitus* (Chicago: William Benton, 1952). “What Is a Skeptic?” editorial in *Skeptic*, vol 11, no. 2), 5.
8. Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1958), “What Happened Friday Afternoon.”
9. Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor Part 3*, Josh McDowell Ministries, 2009, <http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/intermediate/the-resurrection-factor-part-3.htm>.
10. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life, 1981), 66.
11. Gary Collins quoted in Gary Habermas, “Explaining Away the Resurrection,” [http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/crj\\_explainingaway/crj\\_explainingaway.htm](http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/crj_explainingaway/crj_explainingaway.htm).
12. Thomas James Thorburn, *The Resurrection Narratives and Modern Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1910.), 158, 159.
13. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 190.

14. Even skeptical scholars agree that the creed in 1 Corinthians 15 is not an interpolation but was a creed formulated and taught at a very early date after Jesus' death. Gerd Lüdemann, a skeptical scholar, maintains that "the elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus... not later than three years..."[17] Michael Goulder, another skeptical scholar, states that it "goes back at least to what Paul was taught when he was converted, a couple of years after the crucifixion". [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1\\_Corinthians\\_15](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1_Corinthians_15).
15. Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 85.
16. Habermas and Licona, 87.
17. Acts 10:39-41.
18. Morison, 104.
19. J. N. D. Anderson, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Christianity Today*, 12. April, 1968.
20. Morison, 115.
21. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 163.
22. Quoted in Bill Bright, *Believing God for the Impossible* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1979), 177-8.
23. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.
24. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (1874; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), back cover.
25. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 159.



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