

KNOWING & DOING

C · S · LEWIS INSTITUTE



A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

From the Spring 2016 issue of Knowing & Doing:



The Resurrection of Jesus Christ as Christianity's Centerpiece

by Benjamin C. Shaw, *Student Fellow*,
and Gary R. Habermas, Ph.D.

Jesus' resurrection is at the very core of the message preached by His disciples. As C.S. Lewis states, for them to "preach Christianity meant primarily to preach the Resurrection."¹ The apostle Paul was very clear on this point when writing to the church in Corinth. Not only did Paul center on the value of the resurrection for believers, but he highlighted what Christianity would look like *without* this event. According to Paul, if Christ had not been raised from the dead, our sins would not have been forgiven (1 Cor. 15:17); he similarly argued that the Christian faith would be futile (v. 13) and that we should be pitied above all others (v. 19). A more powerful statement regarding the importance of this occurrence is difficult to imagine.

The New Testament's view of the resurrection's significance and its effects should also encourage believers to be familiar with its historical and practical applications. Its historical evidence grounds the Christian's claims in the real world and reveals God's activity. So for the Christian, the resurrection is more than just a historical event that one accepts on rational or historical grounds. It does not stop there. The practical outworkings of this foundational tenet are numerous and cover virtually every aspect of theology as well as the everyday features in the life of the believer.

This essay will begin by highlighting historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Then we will consider how this event influences the present lives of believers.

The Resurrection: Grounded in History

Understanding some of the core historical data surrounding the resurrection will provide grounding for this watershed Christian event. The New Testament does not shy away from setting forth several key details. These well-evidenced facts are so strongly attested that both believing and nonbelieving scholars are virtually unanimous in recognizing and accepting them.² Due to space limitations, we will be able to present briefly only a few of these considerations.

First, *Jesus' death by crucifixion* is a prerequisite for any consideration of Jesus' resurrection. The crucifixion is easily one of the most secure historical facts of the New Testament. Many reasons account for the scholarly unanimity on this point.

Jesus' crucifixion is reported in a plethora of independent sources from both Christian and non-Christian authors. Scholars, including skeptical ones, have counted approximately a dozen relevant sources that attest to the occurrence of this event.

Additionally, the crucifixion is not something that the earliest believers would have invented. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul highlights this very point, acknowledging that this event is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. According to Deuteronomy 21:23 (cf. Gal. 3:13), Jews believed that those who were hung

on a tree (including crucifixion victims) were cursed by God. For the Gentiles, it was foolishness to worship a man who had suffered such a dishonorable death, normally reserved for the worst criminals.

Then look at the scene itself. David Strauss, a radical liberal commentator of nineteenth-century Germany, famously argued that it would be almost unthinkable for someone to believe that Jesus could have somehow survived the crucifixion process, revived in the tomb without medical assistance or sustenance, and rolled away the heavy stone from the tomb entrance—all after having been severely beaten. Then He would have had to walk a distance on feet that had just been pierced through with nails, not to mention His side wound, administered to secure His death.

What would Jesus have looked like when the disciples first saw Him? In His desperate need for medical attention, including cleansing His wounds, He probably would have been limping badly, looking pale, sickly, sweating heavily, as well as slumped over and clutching His wounded side. He probably would have reopened at least some of the wounds that would then have bled again through His garments. In this horrible shape, He could have convinced the disciples that He was just barely alive, but definitely not that He had conquered the grave and was alive forevermore in a newly resurrected body! In short, He would have been alive but absolutely not as the resurrected Prince of Life!³

Had this swoon scenario taken place, the disciples would have more likely procured Jesus a physician rather than proclaiming Him the resurrected Lord! To summarize this crucial distinction: if Jesus was barely alive, anyone could quickly tell that He had absolutely not been victoriously resurrected.

Without the resurrection, there is no Christianity. In short, the swoon or apparent-death hypothesis would never have given rise to the resurrection teaching. Conversely, Jesus must truly have been dead, for Christianity wouldn't have been birthed from the apparent-death hypothesis.

Second, there are numerous independent texts⁴ that attest to *the disciples' eyewitness experiences*. In this article, we will limit ourselves to the most important one: 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. Paul begins this famous chapter on the resurrection by reminding the Corinthians of what he “delivered” to them as of “first importance” during his visit in the early 50s AD. Most scholars believe that Paul recites here an early Christian creed or tradition that begins with verse 3. It provides a list of some of those who saw Jesus: Peter, the twelve, the five hundred, James the brother of Jesus, and all the apostles.

Third, scholars largely agree that Paul received this tradition during his trip to Jerusalem *just three years after his conversion*. In Galatians 1:18–19 Paul describes meeting Peter and Jesus' brother James (both of whom are named in the creed). Scholars are also agreed that this tradition was almost certainly in existence prior to Paul's conversion. As such, dating Paul's appearance on the road to Damascus to about *two* years or so after Jesus was crucified, the tradition would be earlier still, with Paul's reception of it generally being dated to within *five* years after Jesus' death. This is an incredible source of information from very soon after the event itself, attesting to the eyewitness experiences, by both individuals and groups, of the risen Jesus.

Fourth, *James the skeptical brother of Jesus was converted* after he was sure that he had also seen the risen Jesus. There are a number of reasons for scholars' acceptance of this event. James's skepticism is attested by more than one independent gospel source, in Mark (3:21; 6:2–6) and again in John 7:5. Further, Mark's gospel is usually viewed as the earliest. That Jesus' own brothers did not believe in Him is obviously another embarrassing fact, yet it was included because it was historically accurate.

Given James's prominence in the early church, it is unlikely that his skepticism would have been invented from scratch, due to its highly counterproductive nature. Nonetheless, James became a “pillar” of the early church in Jerusalem, and Paul records Jesus' appearance to him in 1 Corinthians 15:7. Critical scholar Reginald H. Fuller found the arguments surrounding James's conversion to be so strong that he wrote, “It might be said that if there



were no record of an appearance to James the Lord's brother in the New Testament we should have to invent one in order to account for his post-resurrection conversion and rapid advance."⁵

Fifth, *the early church persecutor, Paul, was likewise converted* when he was convinced that the risen Jesus had appeared to him. Paul provides us with his own accounts of his conversion, as he was transformed from terrorizing the church to being a committed follower of Jesus and martyr for his faith (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8–10; Gal. 1:12–16, 22–23; Phil. 3:6–7). In addition to Paul's own writings, Acts recounts his conversion three separate times (Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:9–20). This means that the report of Paul's conversion comes from another eyewitness, as well as an early and independent source. Additionally, both Paul and Acts describe the various persecutions that he subsequently endured as a result of his conversion (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:23–29; Phil. 1:12–14; Acts 13:50).

For these reasons, among others, the overwhelming majority of scholars from diverse theological backgrounds think that these five facts are historically secure. Naturalistic theories such as Jesus' apparent death have consistently failed to adequately account for these points. Jesus' resurrection is supported by exceptionally strong facts, and this should encourage Christians to grow and be confident in their faith.

Believers: Grounded in the Resurrection

Established on a powerful historical foundation, how should these events influence the lives of believers today? The resurrection of Jesus is not simply a historical reality to be intellectually affirmed (cf. James 2:19). The event has dramatic consequences—existential and practical effects—in both the present and the future. Here we will address a few of these effects to demonstrate why Christians today can live a life that is encouraged and empowered by Jesus' resurrection.

One critically important aspect of Jesus' resurrection is this: without it, *forgiveness* of sins would not be a reality (1 Cor. 15:17; cf. Rom. 4:25). The forgiveness that Christians receive is based on the gracious act of God in and through Jesus. Another consequence is that this *grace* should be likewise extended through us into the lives of other believers (1 John 4:19–21).

Another benefit of Jesus' resurrection is *hope* both in this life and in the future. Peter explains that, because of the resurrection of Jesus, we are able to rejoice even in the midst of persecution (1 Pet. 1:3, 6–7)! Knowing Peter's own testimony of suffering puts teeth in this admonition. But there's even more here. Jesus' resurrection also secures our future inheritance, and no one can take it away from us (1 Pet. 1:3–5, 8–9)! As Paul also points out in many texts, Jesus' resurrection ensures the believer's afterlife.⁶ Thus, as there is confidence in Jesus' resurrection, so too should there be confidence in our future resurrections.

Accordingly, as Peter pointed out, Christians never live for the future world alone, but Jesus' resurrection brings meaning into the present as well. Don't believe the adage that Christians are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. In fact, it is precisely *because* Jesus died and rose again from the dead that the present life is anything but trivial or inconsequential. As C.S. Lewis commented, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."⁷

One helpful example of the radical nature of this message can be seen in one of Paul's most graphic thoughts. Apart from eternal life, he claims, the most sensible philosophy is "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32 NKJV)! Paul seems to be pointing out that, if it were not for the eternity that is secured by Jesus' resurrection, our ethical life in the present would be reduced to living for the moment's enjoyment. But Jesus' resurrection is what grounds our ethics; it is the reason and motivation for our good behavior. For if the dead are not raised, then we should stop meeting the needs of others and concentrate only on ourselves and how we can enjoy life to the fullest! Admittedly, there is a huge difference between these two modes of living.

But since Jesus *was* raised from the dead and God *will* raise believers as well, Paul is able to count all other things as rubbish for the sake of keeping his eyes on the prize, knowing and pursuing Jesus all the way into eternity



(Phil. 3:7–11; 1 Cor. 9:24–27). The apostle knows that the sacrifices and persecutions he endured are far surpassed by the glory and quality of life that are to come (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21–23).

Other examples of living our present lives to the fullest are drawn from the close of Paul's resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. He commands us to remain "steadfast, immovable" (15:58 NKJV). Christian beliefs comprise the best-grounded, practical, and emotionally satisfying worldview anywhere. We have no excuse but to persevere in our faith, without wavering toward any other options.

In the same verse, Paul also explains that our work in the Lord is not in vain (15:58). To illustrate how practical this is, in the very next verses he is collecting funds to assist impoverished believers (16:1–4). Here he is applying his own hierarchy of giving, expressed in Galatians 6:8–10. Though there are different views among believers on this particular subject, elsewhere Paul seems to say that our work for the Lord *after* salvation will be further rewarded in eternity (1 Cor. 3:8, 14–15). In all these instances, our labor is presented as being not in vain!

Further, this future hope provides a present *comfort*. Suffering, pain, and death are a reality in this world, and Scripture does not teach that believers are exempt. While we still grieve at the loss of loved ones and friends, the promise of resurrection ensures that we do not have to grieve as do those who do not live in the hope of eternal life (1 Thess. 4:13–14). There is indeed a huge difference between grieving *with* hope and grieving *without* hope. We know that what happens in this world is not the last word, as God will "wipe away every tear" and will remove all death, mourning, crying, and pain (Rev. 21:4 NKJV). What an encouragement, knowing that as believers our tribulations in this world are only momentary in the light of eternity (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Meditating on the truth of the resurrection and eternal life by bringing them to the center of our thinking can help us act now in light of their reality. Adopting an eternal perspective can reorient our entire lives if we allow it to do so. By concentrating on the historicity of this past event and looking ahead toward eternal life, we can live a life that is wonderfully full of meaning and fulfillment in the present and the future. Thus the resurrection is not just an isolated past event without relevance; it is an occurrence that offers help now even as it provides hope for the days ahead.

Conclusion

In 1995 the Habermas household watched helplessly as the wife and mother of that home lay dying of cancer that would claim her life just days later. At one point a graduate student inquired, "Where would you be now if it were not for the resurrection of Jesus?" That brief but gripping question spawned rich soul searching and meditation on the power of this event.

We have many evidences of the resurrection of Jesus that are noted by a wide array of theological scholars, providing confidence in its historical reality. As the grounding for all of Christian theology and faith, its significance ought to be integrated practically within the lives of those who follow Jesus today.

So the fact of Jesus' resurrection exhibits significant effects on our history, in our present theology, and in the future lives of believers. This event provides the hope of eternal life, which then reaches backward and influences our present lives with transformative power to work and minister in our world. Instead of a life that ceases with death, we have the promise of the One who defeated death that those who have followed Him will do the same for eternity. Like turning a many-faceted diamond in different directions, the resurrection sheds light on truth, producing an entire host of applications.

As C.S. Lewis once observed,

*The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the 'first fruits', the 'pioneer of life'. He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.*⁸ ■■

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; reprt San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 234.

² For an accessible source that goes into greater depth on some of these facts, see Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

³ David Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, two vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), 1:408–12 (esp. 412).

⁴ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (1971; reprt. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 37. Fuller says that it is clear that the disciples had real experiences, characterized as appearances or visions of the risen Jesus. Whether these are explained naturally or supernaturally, this experience “is a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree.”

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:20–23; 2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Thess. 4:14. In addition to Peter and Paul, other texts include Matt. 12:38–40; John 14:19; Acts 4:2, 33; 1 John 3:2.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1953), 104.

⁸ Lewis, *Miracles*, 237.

The first fact in the history of Christendom is a number
of people who say they have seen the Resurrection.

C.S. Lewis



Gary Habermas is Distinguished Professor of Apologetics and Philosophy and chairman of the department of philosophy and theology at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He holds a Ph.D. (1976) from Michigan State University in History and Philosophy of Religion and an M.A. (1973) from the University of Detroit in Philosophical Theology. He has specialized in cataloging and communicating trends among scholars in the field of historical Jesus and New Testament studies.

Habermas has authored or co-authored 35 books on religious and philosophical subjects, and published numerous articles and reviews.

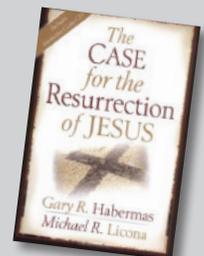
Habermas was married to Debbie for 23 years until her death from cancer in 1995. He then married Eileen. Between them they have seven children and eleven grandchildren.

Benjamin Shaw is a Student Fellow, Theology and Apologetics, Liberty University.

RECOMMENDED READING

Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2004)

This is an accessible, comprehensive, and persuasive resource providing detailed evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. It also demonstrates how to share the material clearly, honestly, and definitively.



Knowing & Doing is published by C.S. Lewis Institute; 8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301; Springfield, VA 22151 | www.cslewisinstitute.org. Electronic copies of this PDF file may be duplicated and transmitted via e-mail for personal or ministry use. Articles may not be modified without prior written permission of the Institute. For questions, you may call us at 703.914.5602 or email us at staff@cslewisinstitute.org.

2016 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE, Discipleship of Heart and Mind

In the legacy of C.S. Lewis, the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ through personal and public life.