

The Case For The Resurrection

When it comes to our faith, there is no more important question than whether or not Jesus was raised from the dead. If He was raised, everything else about our faith stands. If He was not raised, everything else about it falls. The resurrection is the cornerstone of Christianity.

However, this creates problems when we talk about our faith with unbelievers. We accept the resurrection because we accept the Bible as inspired; they reject the resurrection because they don't accept the inspiration of Scripture. There, the matter tends to rest.

A few years ago, though, I encountered a book that offers a solution to this religious impasse. It's called *The Case for the Resurrection*, by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona. Frankly, I think their method is brilliant. Rather than considering the Scriptures from faith, they adopt the approach of scholarly skepticism. They ask, "What are the things that nearly all scholars of the Bible, believers, agnostics, and atheists alike, agree are true?" Then, using only this evidence accepted by the scholarly consensus, they are still able to establish as a historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead. What I'd like to do this morning, then, is work through the argument of *The Case for the Resurrection*.

In building their argument, Habermas and Licona rely on five conclusions they call "minimal facts". The first of these is that JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS. There are doubtless hundreds of passages I could cite here, but let's look at 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. Throughout my sermon this morning, I'm going to lean heavily on the opening context of 1 Corinthians 15, and this is because the text has particular importance to scholars. Everybody agrees that Paul actually did write 1 Corinthians, which is not true with respect to many of the other epistles ascribed to him. Second, due to historical evidence about the Roman proconsul Gallio, we're able to date 1 Corinthians to around 55 AD, less than 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

All of 1 Corinthians is very early, very strong evidence for what early Christians believed, but it gets even better than that. Notice that Paul says he delivered to the Corinthians what he himself had received. In other words, Paul is repeating something that somebody else had told him, and that most likely happened during his first visit to the Jerusalem church as a disciple, when he talked to all of these various witnesses himself. We can date that to sometime around five years after the crucifixion. To scholars, then, this is the single earliest confirmed Christian teaching that we have, and it's about the resurrection.

The first part of it is that Jesus died and was buried. Every book of the New Testament supports this claim. So does every one of the so-called Church Fathers, the Christian writers of the second through fourth centuries. For that matter, it even appears in the writing of the Roman historian Tacitus, who said that Jesus was

executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Basically, no serious scholar denies that Jesus was a real person who was crucified by the Romans.

Habermas and Licona's second minimal fact is that THE EARLY DISCIPLES BELIEVED that Jesus rose from the dead. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:5-6. Let me pause here to highlight a key nuance. We don't want to use this passage at this point as proof that Jesus rose from the dead. Instead, we want to use it to prove the much weaker claim that the early disciples believed He did. Once again, the fact of this subjective belief is something that even atheist scholars will accept. The earliest Christians taught the resurrection, and hundreds of them believed they personally had seen the risen Lord.

The primary proof of their sincerity is their steadfastness in the face of persecution. Who would suffer and die for a story they made up? And yet, suffer and die these early witnesses did. All writers about early Christians, both inside and outside the church, agree that they were despised and treated like dirt. If you're a con man and that's the reception you get, why wouldn't you give up the con? The same holds true for the deaths of several of the apostles. Acts records the execution of James the brother of John. Outside of the Bible, there's strong evidence for the martyrdom of Peter and decent evidence for the martyrdom of Andrew and Thomas.

To this, some might say, "The 9-11 hijackers died as martyrs, and they were wrong." The problem with the argument, though, is that the apostles and the hijackers aren't logically equivalent. The hijackers died for their belief in something they hadn't seen, which proves nothing. The apostles, on the other hand, died for their belief that they had seen something, which proves at least that they were sincere about it.

Our third minimal fact is that JAMES THE LORD'S BROTHER BELIEVED that Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 15:7. Even though James is only one man, in some ways, this evidence is even stronger than the last point. Unlike the disciples, all the way through the ministry of Jesus, James was not a believer.

As evidence for this consider John 7:3-5. You may have noticed that I'm not spending a lot of time in the gospels in this sermon. That's because many scholars regard the gospels with extreme skepticism—after all, they're filled with numerous accounts of supernatural events.

However, there are parts of the gospels that nearly all scholars accept as genuine, and this is one of them. This conclusion is based on the so-called principle of embarrassment. The idea is that when somebody records something that makes their side look bad, it's probably true. In this case, the fact that Jesus' own brothers didn't accept Him makes Him look bad. There's no reason for early Christian writers to say this unless it's true, so everybody agrees that James, along with all of Jesus' other brothers, was not originally a disciple.

However, this changed in a big way. Look at Galatians 1:18-19. By this point, James is not only a believer. He's an apostle. He remains committed to Jesus until death. Multiple extrabiblical sources, particularly the Jewish historian Josephus, record that he was martyred for his faith. Something had to happen to turn a man who was skeptical about his brother's wild claims into a die-hard believer that He was the Son of God, and the only real candidate here is that he thought he had seen Jesus after Jesus rose from the dead.

Fourth, SAUL OF TARSUS BELIEVED that he had seen the risen Lord. He says as much in 1 Corinthians 15:8-10. In some ways, Paul's testimony is the most powerful of all. After all, he doesn't begin as a disciple of Jesus. He isn't even a sarcastic skeptic like James. Instead, he is a persecutor of the church, and not just any persecutor. He is the persecutor, the one who is leading the charge against early Christianity.

However, his course changes even more dramatically than James' does. Rather than being the feared enemy of a small and despised sect, he becomes its single most energetic promoter. He used to be a prominent, respected leader in the Jewish nation; but he spends the last several decades of his life enduring untold suffering for the sake of the gospel he preaches. As with James, Paul is not martyred during the narrative of the New Testament, but numerous patristic writings report that he was, and there's even some archaeological evidence that points in that direction.

Once again, we're not going to use Paul's life story as evidence that he actually did see Jesus after He rose from the dead. However, I think it's safe to use it to establish that Paul sincerely believed that he had seen Jesus—so sincerely that he rearranged his entire life around his conviction.

The final minimal fact that Habermas and Licona introduce is that THE TOMB WAS EMPTY. They themselves are quick to point out that this one doesn't meet with the same universal acceptance from Biblical scholars that the first four do. Instead, by Habermas's count, only about 75 percent of scholars agree. Interestingly, the remaining 25 percent disagree not because there is some piece of contrary evidence, but simply because the 1 Corinthians 15 account doesn't mention the empty tomb.

However, there's still plenty of evidence that, indeed, on that Sunday morning, Jesus' body was nowhere to be found. Habermas and Licona make several arguments to this effect, but my favorite is based on Matthew 28:11-15. Matthew is subject to even more skepticism than the other gospels, but once again, this chunk is accepted as historically accurate. Why would the presumably Christian writer of Matthew make up an alternate explanation for the resurrection only to discredit it? That makes no sense. What does make sense is that the early enemies of the gospel were insistent that the disciples stole the body.

Now, we come to the principle of embarrassment applied to the other side. Why are the chief priests making this argument? It implies that two things are true. They must have known that Jesus was buried in a tomb, and they must have known that the tomb was found empty. If either one of those things is not true, there is no need for them to say that the disciples stole the body out of the tomb.

These, then, are our five minimal facts. Notice that not a single one of them is supernatural. Thousands of years ago, lots of people were crucified. People sincerely believe all kinds of different things. Tombs can be both filled and empty. Not only are all of these things that scholars accept, they're also things that Bible skeptics today can accept. They seem very reasonable.

However, once you put them all together, a very different picture emerges. Every one of these minimal facts is consistent with the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead. In fact, and I'll spoil next Sunday's sermon for you here, the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead is the only conclusion that is consistent with these facts. If you doubt that, see if you can come up with any alternate explanation that satisfies all of them. Jesus was raised—that's the conclusion that even a very skeptical reading of the Bible leads us into.

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