

Christian Apologetics

If Christ has not been raised . . .

Introduction

In our last lesson we asked hard questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Who is he? Why is he important? Given the tremendous, history-altering influence of this man, it is intellectually dishonest to cast him aside as irrelevant. Some honest conclusions must be drawn about this man—where he came from, what he taught and what he did. Jesus matters.

Today we examine the most extraordinary claim about Jesus: On the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures.¹

Why believe the Bible?

Do you believe that the Bible is true? Why do you believe the Bible is true? What is special about the Bible that makes it true?

What objections might a skeptic raise against your faith in the Bible?

Remember the nature of faith

What object does the Christian faith grasp?

Let's examine the historical events on which Christianity asserts its claims:

1. We have eyewitness accounts of Jesus' crucifixion.
 - a. The Romans knew how to execute someone by crucifixion. There is no plausible reason for the soldiers to fail to carry out their duty to put Jesus to death.
 - b. There is no good reason to doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was put to death by crucifixion.
2. We have eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection.
 - a. The initial reaction of witnesses to the resurrected Jesus was doubt, incredulity, disbelief—a very natural and human reaction (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21).
 - b. In replacing one of their own (Judas), the remaining eleven apostles required that the replacement be an eyewitness of the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1:22).
 - c. The followers of Jesus gained nothing from lying about Jesus' resurrection—no money, no power, no prestige.
 - d. The followers of Jesus were willing to endure torture and death rather than take back their claims, making them very credible eyewitnesses. They testified with their lips, and they testified with their lives. (The word *martyr* comes from the Greek word meaning "witness.")
 - e. There is no plausible explanation for the fanatic zeal of the first Christian witnesses. They could not all have been insane. They all got the story straight.
 - f. It is very clear from the writings of the Apostle Paul that the man was absolutely convinced of the veracity of Jesus' resurrection. How else can we explain everything that Paul did and wrote?

¹ Portions of today's discussion outline are based on "Apologetics in Preaching: Resurrection Apologetics" and "Apologetics in Preaching: You Have to Do Something with This Jesus Character," by Michael Berg, in *Preach the Word*, www.wels.net.

- g. The early believers preserved many written accounts of Jesus' ministry, miracles, death and resurrection. These writings were scrupulously and meticulously copied and transmitted as historically accurate documents, not as legends to be retold casually.
3. Only three groups of people had access to the body of Christ: the Romans, the Jewish enemies of Jesus, and the disciples of Jesus. There is no good reason why any of these would fake the resurrection of Jesus.
 - a. The Romans had no incentive to fake the resurrection. They were the ones who crucified him. Pontius Pilate wanted to be rid of a problem.
 - b. The Jewish enemies of Jesus wanted him dead in the first place. They were even suspicious of a possible theft of Jesus' body, and they demanded that the Romans post a guard at the tomb.
 - c. The disciples gained only persecution from their claims of a resurrected Jesus. Most of them were themselves skeptics initially.
 4. Jesus himself claimed to be true God, and he himself said he would suffer, die and rise again from the dead. If Jesus was lying about being God, the only thing it got him was gruesome torture and excruciating death.
 5. Jesus proved his divinity by performing miracles during three years of ministry and by rising from the dead. Eyewitnesses reported and documented these events.
 6. The resurrected Jesus is indeed confirmed to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4). Every assertion he makes must be true, since God cannot lie.
 7. Jesus declared the Bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God. He said that the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). He regularly quoted and referred to the writings of the Old Testament as being reliable and true. He himself promised to send the Holy Spirit, who inspired the New Testament writers.
 8. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, the whole Christian faith is a house of cards that collapses. This is Christianity's own litmus test for its veracity: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).
 - a. If Jesus did not really rise, if the disciples simply imagined a "resurrection experience," if they faked the resurrection or lied about it, there is no point whatsoever to Christianity.
 - b. If Jesus really did rise, he is worth listening to. Anyone who claims he will rise from the dead—and then actually does it!—is worth listening to. In fact, we had better listen to him, since he speaks with the authority of God and will determine what happens to us.

Which Jesus do you confess?

You have an image of Jesus in your mind, a certain way you picture him. How do you picture Jesus? There are probably as many human impressions of Jesus as there are human beings. There is the Republican or the Democrat Jesus; the Marxist Jesus; the self-help Jesus; the life-coach Jesus; the social justice Jesus; the moral enforcer Jesus; the key-to-happiness-and-prosperity Jesus; the motivational speaker Jesus; the cut-us-some-slack (wink-wink!) Jesus; the bedtime story Jesus. Insert your own description here:

You must admit that sometimes your version of Jesus looks more like you want him to be than the way the Bible describes him really to be. This is an important reason for us to stay grounded in the Scriptures. This is where the real Jesus is revealed, shattering our images of him. Our own personal notions of God are only as good as our imaginations. I need a better God than what I can conceive of, and so do you.

- Is Jesus simply an intellectual system of dogmas and talking points? Or is he the living, breathing, all-powerful Son of God, the one who loves you, your own personal "friend of sinners," and your certain companion through life, death and eternity?
- Is Jesus simply a motivational speaker to inspire you with chicken soup for your soul? Or is he God in the flesh, your human and divine brother, who came crashing into our world with words of forgiveness, who speaks peace to your heart, and who feeds you with a heavenly meal as medicine for your soul?

- Is Jesus your moral guide and example to follow? Or is he the one you are crucified with in daily repentance and daily resurrection, so that each day is a new day for you as you forget the past and look forward into eternal freedom?
- Is Jesus only the rabbi who tells you how to live? Or is he the one who lived for you in your place, your righteousness and holiness before God?
- Is Jesus only the fair-weather friend who accompanies you under sunny days and cloudless skies? Or does he call you to take up the cross of discipleship, give you permission to enter the darkness, and give you consolation, hope and peace?

How can you respond?

“I wasn’t there to see Jesus’ resurrection, so I don’t believe it actually took place.”

“This life is all there is. I need to live my best life now. I want to be remembered for my life on earth.”

“Jesus taught about love and peace. He taught a wonderful philosophy of charity and harmony.”

Summary

By the Spirit’s power you confess: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.” This is who you are, a confessor of the truth. This is who the Refiner made you to be. So when the time is right, the Lord himself will give you the words to speak: “My friend, Jesus is so much more than lawgiver, so much deeper than mere story, more real than myth, so much more important than teacher, friend, companion or guide. He is your everything! He is your beginning, your end, and everything in between. He is the one who has loved you with an everlasting love. He is your consolation when you are broken-hearted, your hope when despairing. He is the giver of life to the dead.”

“My friend, here is Jesus—the Christ of God, your Savior!”