

# Questions Surrounding Jesus' Resurrection - Part 4

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We are examining the question: "Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead?" Upon what evidence does the Resurrection of Jesus Christ rest? Philosopher Dr. William Lane Craig presents four historical facts that all critical scholars accept.

## **Four historical facts accepted by critical scholars**

**Dr. William Lane Craig:** It seems to me that there are four fundamental historical facts which any credible historian must account for if he's to give a tenable historical hypothesis about the fate of Jesus of Nazareth. The first of these is the honorable burial of Jesus. The second of these is the discovery of His empty tomb. Third would be the post-mortem appearances of Jesus; and fourth would be the origin of the disciples' belief that Jesus was risen from the dead.

## **Naturalistic theories**

In the past weeks we've presented the evidence for these facts. Today we want to discuss how skeptics have responded to them. In brief, there have been five naturalistic theories proposed to account for the evidence concerning Jesus' Resurrection. Dr. Gary Habermas, one of the leading historians in the world on the evidence for Jesus' Resurrection, explains.

**Dr. Gary Habermas:** Historically, we probably have five major naturalistic theories. You have a couple kinds of fraud theory—1) The disciples did something with the body—stole it, or whatever—and then lied about the appearances. 2) Somebody else did something with the body. 3) Third, maybe Jesus didn't die on the cross. 4) Fourth, the disciples saw hallucinations. Or 5) some variety of legend which says these stories just came about as mythology does and nothing really happened in history regarding the Resurrection.

## **Did the disciples steal the body?**

Now, if you are not a Christian, have you ever appealed to one of these naturalistic theories to try and explain away the evidence for Jesus' Resurrection? If so, I'd like you to listen to why scholars have been forced by the evidence to refute these alternate theories and conclude Jesus must have risen from the

dead. First, let's examine the theory that claims the disciples stole the body and lied about Jesus appearing to them.

**Habermas:** The first form of fraud theory is that the disciples stole the body and that they later lied or misrepresented the data about the appearances. This actually has not been held by a reputable scholar for probably more than 200 years. It was very popular back then and, of course, you find it right in the New Testament. Now, the reason I think critics have mostly given up on it is for several reasons right up front; but it's the disciples who believed they saw appearances of the risen Jesus. How do you steal a body, lie about the appearances, and think you really saw Him? So that crashes on this big rock because everybody believes the disciples thought they saw Jesus.

Secondly, you've got the transformations. They were transformed to the point of willing to die. How do you explain that by a lie or some big fraud? Two major refutations also are the appearance to James, the appearance to Paul. How do you get James and Paul on board to some kind of contrivance, to some kind of fraud? And we could give other reasons but by this point the critic, I think, is saying something like, "I don't take that. Nobody takes that view anyway." But that is one of the historical theories.

### **Did someone else steal the body?**

The second naturalistic theory that is proposed by non-Christians to try to explain away Jesus' resurrection is this: If it wasn't the disciples who stole the body, it must have been someone else. It could have been the gardener or even an unknown person who removed the body. What do scholars say about this theory?

**Habermas:** Okay. The next attempt, let's say: fraud, by other than the disciples. You know, the butler did it. I can be anybody. It can be the gardener as you see in the Gospel of John. It can be...let's make it tough. Let's say, some unknown person removed the body. It's really irrelevant. The major problem with this second variety of fraud that removes it from the disciples, is you don't address the disciples' experiences. No theory that inadequately addresses the disciples' experiences can get on the table because, again, the disciples **believed** they saw appearances of the risen Jesus. How do you get that from somebody else taking the body?

In fact, let's say it this way. With fraud 2, so to speak: somebody else other than the disciples removed the body—all you've got is an empty tomb explanation. It says nothing about the experiences; nothing about the transformations; nothing about James; nothing about Paul. By this time, the critic again is going, "I didn't say that anyway," you know? And you're down the stream and you've given up on both the fraud theories.

### **Why are James and Paul powerful witnesses to the Resurrection?**

Now, in listening to Dr. Habermas, I wondered how many of you know what

he's talking about when he mentioned "James, the brother of Jesus" and "the Apostle Paul." Before we go on, I asked him to talk about why these two men provide such important proof for the Resurrection of Jesus. Listen.

**Habermas:** Well, one rule of historiography is the principle of embarrassment. When you're saying something important and you admit there's a weakness over here, it probably really reflects something that occurred in time and space. In John 7, we learn that James was a skeptic. And in the Synoptics, when Jesus comes home, His brothers and sisters are not part of that believing crew.

I think to myself, "You know, an insider skeptic presents a special dimension." Here's somebody who's been raised and was He ever told, "Jesus did a better job on this." Or you don't have to be told; you can just see it. And how many times do you, Uh! It's hard for me to take this. He's always an angel, you know? And uh!" And he doesn't believe.

Now, we turn a few pages in the New Testament and where's James? He's the pastor of the largest church in the Ancient World. And in Acts 15 at the so-called Jerusalem Council Peter's here, Paul's here. Who hands down the final word? One of those guys, right? No. James stands up and gives the deciding opinion. When you're in James, when you're in his domain, when you're in Jerusalem, you listen to what he's got to say. He's the pastor.

Now, how do you go from skeptic to biggest pastor in the Ancient World? Paul supplies that answer in 1 Corinthians 15:7. He says, "and then He appeared to James also." Now, Reginald Fuller says, even if Paul doesn't have this bridge from skeptic to pastor, I still have to assume there was one. Why? Fuller says, without that appearance, I can't assume: 1) that James was converted. I have no reason for it; and 2) his subsequent elevation to this important post as pastor from this "insider" over here. And the conclusion is, we have strong evidence here for the Resurrection. What led to James' conversion and subsequent promotion in the early Church?

### **Why did Paul become a follower of Jesus?**

Many people look at the Apostle Paul, and when they try to figure out why he became a Christian, they stumble. They give a lot of naturalistic explanations, but what Paul himself said makes sense.

**Habermas:** Well, we have Paul's testimony here and Paul is taken seriously because today—a little saying I use oftentimes in the classroom, "Paul is in and the Gospels are out." And I don't think we need to go along with that. We can work on the Gospels. But we do have Paul. And from Paul's 13 epistles that bear his name, critics will unanimously give you somewhere between 5 and 8 of those epistles. And Paul himself says that, for example, in the Book of Philippians he says he was persecuting the church. He was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," a Pharisee, no friend of Christianity. He thought he was doing God a favor to take men and women and children captive. And he was participating in their deaths sometimes as in holding the clothing of those who were stoning Stephen in the Book of Acts.

So Paul is definitely a skeptic. You might say he had a Ph.D. under Gamaliel in Hebrew studies and this is a cult and he's been given the mantle. He's the man. He's the choice to go after these Christians. And he meets the risen Jesus. Jesus says, "I want you. You're my man." And Paul sees the resurrected Jesus and now he becomes perhaps the greatest missionary theologian mind in the early Church.

Now, we have Paul's own testimony here for what happened. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:8 at the end of that creed, after summarizing the creed he says, "last of all, he appeared to me as one born out of due time." A few chapters earlier, same book, 1 Corinthians 9:1, he says, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen the Lord?" And all through Paul's writings the Resurrection is the key.

So you get "The Resurrection is the key for what I'm doing; He appeared to **me** in particular." And you know, Paul never lost the thankfulness to God for the grace He extended to him: "Thank you for saving me out of my previous studies and bringing me to Yourself." But again, the key, if it wasn't for that Resurrection appearance of Jesus, Paul would not be in the camp and he would not be a witness, but he is.

### **What is the Swoon Theory?**

Now, with that evidence in mind, let's discuss one of the most popular theories skeptics have proposed to try to explain away Jesus' resurrection. It's called the swoon theory and it says Jesus didn't die on the cross, He just fainted or swooned. Dr. Habermas explains.

**Habermas:** Now, the swoon theory was the most popular theory through the 1700s and especially through, say, the first third of the 1800s, the 19th century until David Strauss brought the deathblow down on it. Before we talk about that, I'll remind ourselves here quickly that medicine has stepped in in the meantime and said, "Well, look, death by crucifixion is death by asphyxiation. And death by crucifixion suffers, in the case of Jesus, from the heart wound. If He wasn't dead already [by crucifixion], He would have been [as a result of the heart wound]."

Now, back to Strauss because if medicine wasn't known but we add Strauss to it and Strauss made fun of the swoon theory. He was quite far to the left. He was pensioned off from Tübingen University for being too liberal but in his major work in 1835 in *Life of Jesus* he said the swoon theory is not going to work and the problem is this: It is self-contradictory. What you have from the swoon is a living Jesus but not a resurrected Jesus and here's how it works.

Jesus should have died on the cross; He didn't. He should have died in the tomb; He didn't. He certainly can't roll the stone away. No problem. He did. Now, Strauss didn't believe in a guard but for those who believe a guard is sitting out there, He works His way through the guards. But here's the problem for Strauss. Again, you've got: didn't die on the cross; didn't die in the tomb; couldn't roll the stone. He comes to where the disciples are. [Knock, knock, knock] He knocks on the door. What's this man going to look like? He's a human Jesus. He's been

crucified. He's worked the wounds open again. He's bleeding from the scalp. His hair has not even been washed. I mean, you've got sweat and blood and He's worked the side open again. And He hunched over, He's limping, He's pale. And [knock, knock, knock]: "I told you I would rise again from the dead."

The problem, Strauss said, with the swoon theory is you get a Jesus who's alive but you don't get a Jesus who is raised. Now, Strauss does not believe in the Resurrection, but he knows the disciples did. And the swoon doesn't get you from A to B. You get this kind of Jesus: "Lord, come on in. Get a chair. Get a pail of water. Call the doctor."

To paraphrase Strauss, the disciples would have gotten a doctor before they proclaimed Him risen because here's Peter over in the corner saying, "Oh, boy! Some day I'm going to have a resurrection body just like His." And that, by the way, is the proclamation that is most tied to the Resurrection of Jesus: that believers will be raised. Now, again, Strauss doesn't think believers are going to be raised and he doesn't think there's a guard and he doesn't think that Jesus was raised, but if you can't get that belief on the disciples' part, it doesn't work. And the problem is, "swoon" can't account for the experiences that the disciples had that they thought were appearances of the risen Jesus.

### **Were the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus merely hallucinations?**

The fourth naturalistic explanation given by skeptics trying to explain what happened to Jesus' disciples is the "Hallucination" theory. Here, instead of Jesus actually appearing to His disciples in His literal, physical body, they say that the disciples saw an hallucination instead.

**Habermas:** What's wrong with hallucination theory? Probably no theory has more problems.

Problem number one: Groups of people, not even two at once, see the same hallucination. An hallucination is something you believe so firmly that you invent the mental picture. Two cannot share an hallucination any more than two can share a dream. So, if you have examples of group appearances and you have them, for example, three in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff, those are not hallucinations, not as a group.

Secondly, the disciples didn't believe it. It's granted by everybody, both from scripture and from psychology, that you can't have exuberant, expecting disciples after this calamity—best friend, livelihood, everything is destroyed. And they're supposed to be hoping for a Resurrection and making these sorts of images. So second, they're not in the right frame of mind.

Three may be the most devastating one. Too many different people, times, places. You have men, you have women. Indoors, outdoors. Walking, standing. Everything. The problem is, to believe that every one of these people manufactured a private, individual hallucination is beyond credulous. We rarely even see hallucinations today but they were just supposed to have them on demand. That's too problematic.

Fourth problem: if the disciples were seeing hallucinations, we've got a little problem with the empty tomb. It wouldn't be empty. And so the leaders are saying, "Now, fellows, we've got a problem here." Now critics say, "Now, come on, 50 days later what would the body look like?" Hey look, it doesn't make any difference. This body looks like it's crucified. Here's the nails. This is your man. Blows the theory away. So the empty tomb is a deathblow to hallucination.

Hallucinations do not change lives, do not transform lives forever. I've got a couple of friends who are experimenting with hallucinations at this present time, and people are talked out of hallucinations. You can say something that corrects it and when they were talked out of them, here's what they said. Two refutations. People say, "Those things don't happen. My friends didn't see it. If they didn't see it, if somebody's there who didn't see it, they tell the other people, especially something strange like a Resurrection. They don't transform lives.

There's five problems. Let me add two others real fast. James and Paul. They're not in the right frame of mind. James, the inside skeptic. What's going to make him quit gritting his teeth and embrace his risen brother? And what brings Paul from the Ph.D. scholar in Judaism to an embracing Christian authority, missionary, theologian? I think it's pretty hard to say either one of them wanted, longed to see the risen Jesus.

Seven criticisms. We could go further. There are many, many, but those are just some of the problems with hallucination.

**Craig:** One further problem with the hallucination hypothesis is that it has weak explanatory power. It's offered as an explanation of the appearances; but in fact, it does not explain why the disciples came to believe Jesus was risen from the dead. For you see, given the typical Jewish mentality about beliefs in the afterlife, they would have believed that Jesus would have gone to Abraham's Bosom, to Paradise, where the souls of the righteous dead would be with God until the Resurrection at the end of the world. And therefore, if they had hallucinated visions of Jesus, they would have projected visions of him as exalted, in Heaven, where God had taken him up until the Resurrection at the end of the world. But that at most would have led them to proclaim the "assumption" of Jesus into Heaven or the glorification of Jesus in Heaven, not his literal resurrection from the dead.

### **Was the Resurrection story copied from Mystery Religions?**

The final naturalistic theory that has been proposed by non-Christians to explain Jesus Resurrection is the assumption that Jesus' Resurrection parallels Greco-Roman myths about dying and rising gods. It is suggested that Christians just copied the idea from the Mystery religions. In fact, this was one of the theories presented by some of the scholars during the Peter Jennings ABC Special, *The Search for Jesus*. Dr. William Lane Craig explains why the evidence completely refutes this theory.

**Craig:** I was stunned, frankly, to hear on the ABC Special one of the scholars

interviewed suggest that the earliest disciples may have been prompted to come to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead because of Greco-Roman myths about dying and rising gods. And the reason I was surprised, you see, was because this was a hypothesis that was bandied about in the so-called “history of religions” school of thought back at the close of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. But the school soon collapsed and it has been virtually universally given up today among New Testament scholars. So that the idea that the disciples came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of Greco-Roman myths is simply obsolete.

Generally, New Testament scholars today recognize that the proper framework for understanding Jesus of Nazareth is *not* Greco-Roman mythology but, rather, it is first century, Palestinian Judaism and it is against the background of Judaism that the prophet from Nazareth is *properly* to be understood. And the whole movement of the Jewish reclamation of Jesus, of understanding the Jewishness of Jesus, is testimony to this fact.

Now, why did that history of religion school collapse? Well, primarily two reasons. Number one, the parallels were spurious. In fact, there are no parallels to the resurrection narratives or the empty tomb narratives in Greco-Roman mythology. These dying and rising gods did not concern historical figures at all. They were merely mythological symbols of the crop cycle. The crops dry up and die in the hot, arid mid-Eastern summer and then they come back to life when the winter and spring rains come. And it wasn't thought at all that these were applied to historical individuals. Indeed, really they didn't concern resurrections at all. These gods like Tammuz and Adonis and Osiris didn't *really* return to life, didn't really come back to life from the dead—they still existed in the afterlife. So that it's really a complete misnomer to think of these as parallel to the empty tomb and appearance narratives and belief in the Resurrection of Jesus.

But secondly, there's no causal connection between these myths and the earliest disciples. You see, these myths were known in Judaism and Jews found them utterly abhorrent; they were blasphemous to orthodox Jews. And the idea that the earliest disciples of Jesus would sincerely come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was risen from the dead because they'd heard these myths about Osiris and Adonis and Hercules is as absurd as your coming to believe that some friend of yours is risen from the dead because you saw the movie *E.T.* and *E.T.* came back to life in the movie. It's just historically absurd to think that these men would sincerely have come to believe Jesus was risen from the dead on the basis of these myths and then be willing to go to torturous deaths in attestation to the truth of that belief.