

# Resurrection

## Part 2 - Did Jesus really come back from the dead? And the proof?

In the 2017 movie, *The Case for Christ*, an award-winning investigative reporter for the Chicago Tribune, Lee Strobel, is faced with a challenge about Christianity that makes good use of his skills in getting at the roots of a story to make sure it's true.

The challenge for Lee begins in 1980, after his daughter nearly chokes to death at a restaurant. A Christian nurse saves the girl's life, claiming Jesus had guided her to that restaurant rather than the restaurant she was planning to go to. Lee, being a self-professed atheist, is not the least bit convinced it was Jesus, but his wife is, and she starts attending the Christian nurse's church.

Lee wants nothing to do with God, Jesus, or Christianity, so he's now faced with his marriage breaking up. Being an investigative reporter he decides he's going to debunk Christianity to get his wife back, by following the motto on the wall of the Tribune's newsroom, "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." In other words, don't just believe something is true, even if it seems obvious; you have to go where the evidence leads you, and stick like glue to that alone.

To debunk Christianity, therefore, Lee decides he's going to check it out and only go where clear facts and evidence take him. But where does he start? Well, according to a fellow reporter at the Tribune, "Everything hinges on the resurrection of Christ."

And Paul agrees, **1 Corinthians 15:14**, because "if Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless and so is your faith." So Paul puts out the same challenge: Christianity stands or falls on whether Jesus was raised from the dead, or not. Disprove Christ's resurrection and Christians could legitimately be called "false witnesses about God that he raised Christ from the dead" (15).

All Lee had to do, then, was prove Christ had not been raised from the dead and he could tell his wife, "your faith is futile" (17), because who, in his or her right mind, would put their faith in something that isn't true?

Or as Paul puts it in **1 Corinthians 15:29-30**, “If the dead are not raised (then) why do we endanger ourselves every hour?” - and in **verse 32**, “If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reason, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” Why bother being Christian, Paul asks - and suffering for it too - if Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead, and nor are we?

So Paul pins a large target on the back of every Christian that anyone can take potshots at to poke holes in Christianity. Come up with proof that Jesus was not raised from the dead and Christianity can be rightly rejected.

But how on earth do you prove or disprove the resurrection of Jesus when it happened so long ago? Lee discovered there are three obvious routes to take to start off with: Attack the subject historically, culturally, and logically.

Being an investigative reporter he looked for HISTORICAL proof first of all. If Jesus’ resurrection really happened, then surely such an amazing event would have stirred all sorts of people to write about it. So, were actual records of Jesus’ resurrection written down and preserved by people near to the time it happened?

Yes, in the letters of Paul, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and in the Book of Acts. They contain everything a historian looks for in validating an event in history, such as:

- 1) People who saw and heard what happened, who then wrote down what they saw and heard very soon afterwards.
- 2) Living witnesses at the time who could corroborate and confirm what these people wrote down as true (or reject it as false).
- 3) Preservation of those witness reports and records that have survived the passage of time and criticism.

The New Testament provides all three of those points in spades. But, some critics claim, the New Testament is biased, so it can’t be trusted as a valid historical document. But bias hasn’t made historians reject the writings of other men from that era, like Josephus, Cicero, and Seneca. Josephus was obviously biased in favour of the Jews, but historians are well aware of that and still greatly value his insights into New Testament times. Bias, therefore, is no reason for treating the New Testament differently to any other historical document describing what happened in that era.

Some critics, however, claim that the reports of Jesus' resurrection were just inventions to prove the legitimacy of Christianity. But on that basis how do we know the reports of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar and their exploits weren't inventions too? Be fair; the same rules apply to all.

History is based on compelling evidence, and the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is compelling all right. According to **1 Corinthians 15:6**, for instance, the resurrected Jesus "appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, **most of whom are still living.**" Paul could literally talk to hundreds of people who'd witnessed Jesus alive from the dead. That's like making a documentary about World War 2 and being able to talk to people who lived through the war and wrote down what they saw and experienced personally. Eye-witness reports like that are a goldmine for historians.

But how did Paul get to hear about these five hundred eye-witnesses in the first place? He answers that in **verse 3** when he writes, "For what I received I passed on to you." All these reports of Jesus' resurrection had been passed on to him. Many scholars now believe that 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 was a creed or tradition that had been written down within months of Jesus' resurrection, which Paul then "received" from the apostles in Jerusalem when he visited them in 35 AD (Galatians 1:18-19). So Paul is quoting reports about Jesus written just months after Jesus was raised from the dead. And if those reports were wrong then there were people still living who could have corrected Paul, and he accepts that. His letter was out in the open for anyone to find fault with what he wrote.

So now we have hundreds of eye-witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, documents written very close to the event confirming it, and copies in circulation already.

And historians want lots of copies too, the more the better, so they can cross reference what's written to see if it's similar. There are 1,500 recovered manuscripts of Homer's *Iliad* about the siege of Troy, for instance, confirming its authenticity, but in Lee Strobel's research he found there are 5,843 recovered manuscripts of the New Testament. Nothing else in the history of that era comes even close to the number of documents we have of the New Testament, giving historians lots of opportunity to find fault.

Critics have **tried** to find fault too, pointing to the differences in the details about Jesus' resurrection by the four gospel writers, like the number and names of the women who arrived at the empty tomb.

But differences in the details don't disturb historians, when the CORE of the story is the same, which it is in all four gospels. When the Titanic sank, for instance, some eye-witnesses said it stayed in one piece, others said it broke in two. Either way, it doesn't change the core of the story that the Titanic sank. Police at an accident or crime scene never expect eye-witnesses to totally agree either, but disagreement in the details doesn't mean the accident or the crime never happened.

Differences in details are typical of personal eye-witness reports. If the details were exactly the same it would suggest collusion or deliberate tampering with the evidence, so the four gospels **not** agreeing in the details makes their witness more convincing, not less.

Other critics say the gospels were simply borrowed from previous pagan myths of gods rising from the dead. But no pagan (or Jewish) myth talked of an actual man coming back from the dead. And even if a pagan myth does appear to be similar to the resurrection story, how does that prove the resurrection story was borrowed? In 1898, for instance, fourteen years before the Titanic sank, a novel titled ***The Wreck of the Titan*** was written about an unsinkable passenger liner hitting an iceberg and sinking 400 miles from the coast of Newfoundland, and half the passengers die. But do the amazing similarities between that fictional story and the actual sinking of the Titanic mean the Titanic was just a myth borrowed from the novel?

It's like saying the plane that ploughed into the World Trade Centre in New York in 2011 between the 79<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> floors, killing everyone on board and hundreds of others in the building, was actually just a myth borrowed from an amazingly similar story in July 1945 when a B25 hit the Empire State building between the 79<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> floors killing everyone on board and hundreds of others in the building. Was 9/11 just a myth borrowed from a previous event, then, just because it's so similar to it? No historian worth his oats would support that.

Historically, then, the evidence very much supports a real event happening when Jesus was resurrected. For those who question that evidence, the question has to be asked of them: "**When is enough evidence enough evidence?**" That was the question Lee Strobel was asked, and what could he say in reply to it when the rules of investigative reporting - and the rules of scholarship for historians - all pointed to Jesus' resurrection being true?

The evidence CULTURALLY points to the resurrection being true too, because no major movement of that time originating with Jews would have continued after their leader was killed. Other men of that time had claimed the title of “Messiah,” but as soon as they were killed their movements fizzled out, because the Jews were expecting a Messiah who would defeat their enemies, not be killed by them.

And culturally the gospel writers would never have chosen women to be eye-witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection, because women had no legal status and their testimony was inadmissible in court. It was embarrassing having women be the primary witnesses, which only adds to the proof that the gospel writers were simply reporting what actually happened, rather than fabricating a story.

LOGICALLY, then, what better explanation can there be for all this historical and cultural evidence other than Jesus being resurrected? How do you explain the sudden change in the disciples, from fear and doubt to excitement and the willingness to die for what they believed happened? How do you explain the explosive way Christianity grew, and still grows, based entirely on the belief that Jesus came back from the dead? And what’s the most logical explanation for Saul of Tarsus, the most vicious persecutor of Christians, becoming an apostle putting his life on the line announcing Jesus was the resurrected Son of God?

Clearly, something new and totally unexpected happened at that point in history that shocked people into spreading the news, no matter what risk to themselves. Was it all a cleverly contrived hoax, though? Maybe, as critics claim, Jesus never actually died, or people only **thought** they saw him alive again. But logically speaking, how could Jesus have survived the crucifixion when crucifixion was designed by the Romans to kill? Crucifixion guaranteed death by asphyxiation, when exhaustion would render the victim unable to push himself up to breathe, and no one could fake that. The separation of blood and water pouring out of Jesus’ body when the Roman stabbed him with his spear was also evidence that Jesus was medically dead.

The Romans were masters at execution, and their own lives were on the line if anyone survived. And even if Jesus did survive the flogging and the crucifixion and he was put in the tomb while still alive, how could he - in his massively weakened condition - have loosened himself from the tightly bound linen he was wrapped in, weighed down by 70 pounds of spices, and then moved the huge stone from the entrance and overpowered the Roman guards?

And who, logically, would have followed such a man in his condition? Jesus was a physical wreck, covered in blood and wounds. The last thing people would think of when looking at Jesus' tattered body was to make him their leader. They'd more likely be thinking, "Get that poor man to a hospital."

And those five hundred eye-witnesses - well, maybe they only **thought** they saw Jesus alive, in some sort of mass hallucination. But logically speaking how can five hundred people have the same hallucination at the same time? And would people be willing to die for a hallucination, too?

When the disciples first saw Jesus after his resurrection they thought he was a ghost, but Jesus corrected that by asking for something to eat. And that's what convinced them he wasn't an apparition and they **weren't** hallucinating. It really was Jesus standing before them in a healed human body.

And Lee Strobel was convinced of it too, because the evidence supporting Jesus' resurrection was simply undeniable. But he soon discovered it was difficult convincing **other** people with the evidence, because what they wanted was proof of Jesus' resurrection **SCIENTIFICALLY**. The problem with that, of course, is that Jesus' resurrection was a **supernatural** event involving God, and science only deals with the natural.

But science and the proof of Jesus' resurrection do agree on one point; that if you can't actually get the facts nailed down for certain, you can still come up with a "best explanation" for what information you do have. Scientists don't know for certain that the universe began with a "Big Bang", for instance, because no scientist was there to observe it. But the information gathered so far makes the Big Bang highly convincing. And the same applies to the resurrection of Jesus: What better explanation is there for how Christianity began and evolved into the largest religion on Earth today, other than Jesus being resurrected?

But there are many people today, and especially young people, who reject all that historical, cultural and logical evidence of Jesus' resurrection, because they hear Christians saying that everything changed when Jesus ascended to heaven after his resurrection, that a new creation began on this planet with Jesus in charge, and he's now restoring humans to what God originally created us to be. "**But where is the proof of it?**" they ask, when there's still so much suffering, war, disease, poverty, corruption and mental illness in the world, and religion hasn't made people act any better either?

And look at the state of the Christian Church too, riddled with pedophiles, practicing homosexuals, the cruelty of residential schools, the celebration of same-sex marriage and gender fluidity, the fearsome threats of hell for unsaved souls, and the weirdness of floating in disembodied souls in heaven for eternity. Throw in the Crusades and other killings done by Christians in God's name - like the vicious battles between Catholics and Protestants - and no wonder we're living in a post-Christian, anti-Christian world.

Look at the state of individual Christians as well, suffering all the same problems of sickness, accidents, depression, anger, broken marriages and financial worries as everyone else. So where are all these wonderful changes that prove Jesus was resurrected and is now in charge putting things to rights? If they're not visible in the world or in a sorely divided and messed up Christian church, or in the visible lives of Christians, where do we look for proof instead?

And isn't that the next challenge we face as Christians? We can easily provide evidence of Jesus' resurrection historically, culturally and logically, but a person could then say, "So you can prove Jesus was resurrected, but so what? What difference does it make to anyone alive today? More to the point, what difference has the resurrection of Jesus made to you personally?"

And isn't that the ultimate (and fourth) evidence of Jesus' resurrection? It's in the very real and obvious effect that Jesus' resurrection has had on us Christians PERSONALLY. It's in what happened to us personally **after** we proved Jesus' resurrection historically, culturally and logically. It's in what's happened to us **since** we realized his rising from the dead meant that everything he said about himself was true, and therefore he's alive right now to **make** what he said about himself come true for us **personally**.

So what exactly DID Jesus say about himself that he's now making happen for us personally - and we know it in our own experience?

Probably the most well-known thing Jesus said - heard often at Christian funerals - is **John 11:25-26**, when Jesus told Martha, "**I am the resurrection and the life**. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"? Jesus is telling Martha that if she believes what he's saying about himself being the resurrection and the life he will **make what he is** begin to happen in her life right away, rather than having to wait until "the last day" for it to happen (verse 24).

So Jesus lifts that term “resurrection” beyond just **an event** that happened in history into something that can begin to happen in a person’s life in the present. And that’s HIS proof of the resurrection; it’s raising people from their dead lives into his life, a life that never dies. Or as he put it back in **John 5:24 and 26**, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me **has eternal life**...he has crossed over from death to life....For as the Father has life in himself, he has granted the Son to have life in himself.” Or as John phrases it in **1 John 5:11-12**, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” In Jesus, then, we have the Son of God with “eternal life in himself” now giving that life of his to us.

But how does that play out in real life? In what ways do we experience his life in us in our everyday lives now? And isn’t that what young people - with their future stretching out ahead of them - would like to know? What real experience of Jesus being “the resurrection and the life” can they expect to happen to them in the here and now?

Paul’s answer to that is in **2 Corinthians 1:8-9** when he talks “about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.” Paul reached the point he couldn’t take any more. And who doesn’t feel that way at some point in life, when hope is shattered by illness, accidents, job loss, family and marriage issues, personal addictions and crippling stress from things never getting any better? “But,” Paul continues in verse 9, what he and his companions suffered “happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, **WHO RAISES THE DEAD.**”

Paul puts this entire physical experience we call “life,” with all its hardships and stress that drive us to despair at times and even to wanting to end it all, into one simple package: It’s all meant to teach us that we need Jesus to be “the resurrection and the life” for us. We need him to raise us from the dead, to lift us out of our hopelessness and weakness and our inability to cope with our emotions and the circumstances we’re in, and “deliver us from our deadly peril,” as Paul phrases it in verse 10, **SO THAT** when we trust the resurrected Jesus to do that for us and he does it, and we know it, we then “set out hope that he will **CONTINUE** to deliver us” any time we get in such a fix and mood again.

Because that way we will **KNOW** he’s alive, he’s real, and he really was resurrected from the dead to do this for us **PERSONALLY** in the here and now, **exactly as he said he would**. And according to Jesus this is what’s available to anyone who believes him, because this is what he was resurrected for.