

## Did Jesus really come back from the dead?

### Part 1 - Challenged to find out

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 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?

And again, Paul agrees, **verse 32**, because “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?

## Part 2 - Proof historically

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?

Well, is there any HISTORICAL evidence first of all? Because 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, there were - in the letters of Paul, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and in the Book of Acts. And they all 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. So does that argument hold water?

### **Part 3 - More proof historically**

How do we know the resurrection wasn't just a Christian invention? 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 plenty of 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, too.

So now we have hundreds of eye-witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, plus documents written very close to the event confirming it, and copies in circulation already. And historians want lots of copies too, the more the merrier, so they can cross reference what's written to see if they agree. There are 1,500 recovered manuscripts of Homer's Iliad about the siege of Troy confirming its authenticity, but 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. So have they found any faults?

#### Part 4 - Critics

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

But differences in 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 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. 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 2001 between the 79th and 80th floors was just a myth too, borrowed from an amazingly similar story in July 1945 when a B25 hit the Empire State building between the 79th and 80th 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.

The question has to be asked of critics, therefore, "When is enough evidence enough evidence?" Especially when the rules of scholarship for historians have all been adhered to. But if it still isn't enough evidence - there's more to come...

### **Part 5 - Proof culturally and logically**

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?

Because maybe Jesus didn't die and need to be resurrected in the first place. But how could Jesus have survived the crucifixion? 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 too, and their own lives were on the line if anyone survived. Logically, then, Jesus required a resurrection to be alive again...

## **Part 6 - Proof scientifically**

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 on his own strength move the huge stone from the entrance and overpower at least two armed Roman guards on sentry duty outside?

And who would have followed such a man in his mangled condition too? Jesus was a physical wreck, covered in blood and gaping wounds. The last thing people would think of doing 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."

But maybe, as some claim, those five hundred eye witnesses who saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion were hallucinating, and they only thought they saw him alive. Do they have a point, though? Because when the disciples first saw Jesus after his resurrection they thought he was a ghost, and maybe they were hallucinating too. But Jesus immediately corrected that by asking for something to eat (Luke 24:36-43). Ghosts don't eat. And that's what convinced them it really was Jesus standing before them in a healed human body. And who would be willing to die for a hallucination, too?

Historically, culturally and logically the evidence supporting Jesus' resurrection is undeniable. But for some people that's still not enough. They want SCIENTIFIC proof. Which is a bit difficult because how can the scientific method of observation, experimentation and testing be applied to a one time event that cannot be repeated? Like the "Big Bang." No one was there at the time to see that either, nor can it be repeated. So how do scientists conclude that it happened?

Because the scientific method allows for a "best explanation." If you can't get all the facts you're left with: "What is the best explanation for the information gathered so far?" And the information gathered so far makes the Big Bang highly convincing. And with the information gathered so far for 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 for some that's **still not enough** - because...

## **Part 7 - Proof personally**

There are many people today, and especially young people, who reject the historical, cultural, logical, and even the scientific evidence of Jesus' resurrection. And for an understandable reason too, 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 - and even RE-creating - 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?

Good point. And look at the state of the Christian Church too, riddled with pedophiles, practicing homosexuals, bishops voting to celebrate 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 too. Throw in the Crusades for good measure, and all the 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 "want nothing to do with God" world.

And 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 of the whole world 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? If no obvious changes have happened to us **PERSONALLY** for believing Jesus was resurrected, surely it renders all that historical, cultural, logical and scientific proof obsolete, doesn't it? I mean, why bother with Jesus' resurrection at all if it doesn't make any noticeable and wonderful difference in a person's life?

So, what differences in us personally did Jesus say would happen?...

### **Part 8 - Proof daily**

In **John 5:24**, Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has crossed over from death to life." And by "life" he meant "eternal" life (same verse) - meaning **we can experience eternal life now**. Every day.

John confirms that in **1 John 5:11** when he writes, "God has given us eternal life." It's **already** ours to experience, therefore. John explains how it's ours too: it's because "**this life is in his Son.**" Jesus is the source of it. So anyone "who has the Son," **verse 12**, "has life." To have Jesus in our life means we can experience eternal life now, every day. But how?

Paul gave us a clue from his own life in **2 Corinthians 1:8-9**, when writing 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? "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, into one simple package: It’s all meant to teach us that **Jesus is always there for us**, night and day, to raise us from the dead, by lifting us, as he did Paul, out of our hopelessness, weakness, and our inability to cope with our emotions and the circumstances we’re in. We need him to “deliver us from our deadly perils” too, as Paul phrased it in **verse 10**, **SO THAT** when we trust the resurrected Jesus to do that for us and he does it, we then “set out hope that he will **CONTINUE** to deliver us” any time - **and any day** - we get in such a fix again.

Because that way we’ll **KNOW** he’s alive. We’ve got real live experiences in our everyday lives, proving to us again and again that we’ve already “crossed over from death to life” - because Jesus really did come back from the dead to make it possible.