

# Jesus Is Precious Because His Biblical Portrait Is True, Part 1

by John Piper

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*The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of the Christian faith, and it is essential to persuade both the head and the heart with evidences, arguments, and a demonstration of value.*

**Duration:** 29:13

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, Acts 2:32, Acts 3:15, Acts 4:2, Acts 5:29-32, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

**Topics:** "Preciousness Of Jesus"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of having a solid foundation for our faith in Jesus. He plans to spend the next seven weeks addressing the question of whether Jesus is worth following. The speaker acknowledges the need for both evidence and heartfelt conviction in making a commitment to follow Jesus. He intends to provide reasons and evidence to support the claims of Scripture and the integrity of its writers. The speaker specifically highlights the resurrection of Jesus as a crucial aspect of the New Testament's portrait of Jesus and the foundation of our faith.

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## Transcript

Our text this morning is found in 1st Corinthians chapter 15, reading the first 11 verses, 1st Corinthians 15. Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preach to you the gospel which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast, unless you believed in vain. For I deliver to you, as of first importance, what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Caiaphas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed. Suppose that you went to visit a person who didn't know English very well, couldn't read it, and they were about to drink a bottle of iodine. And your natural compassion and love of life obliged you to stop them.

Now, to stop them without force, you need to persuade them of two things. First of all, you need to persuade them that iodine is poison and might kill them. And so you muster your arguments and you say, look, this mark here on the label means this stuff is poison.

This will hurt you. This is not made to drink. This is made for the skin.

Look, here are the instructions. Take my word for it. I've got experience with this.

I know I've got no reason to lie to you. And you build your case to try to persuade them that they shouldn't go ahead and drink that iodine. And you convince them they're converted.

They change their opinion and they adopt your view of things. And then the person puts the bottle to his lips and begins to drink. And you say, wait a minute, you want to kill yourself? And they say, yes.

And you realize that not just one thing must be told. They must not be persuaded of only that, that it will kill them. But a second thing, life is worth living.

You can convince them with your irrefutable arguments that if he drinks, he's dead. And if he doesn't, he's alive. And none of those arguments will have any effect if he doesn't care.

If his depression is so great and his heart is so heavy and his mind is so stifled with frustration that life looks totally unworth living, then all the proof in the world that iodine will kill you and not drinking will keep you alive will not persuade that person not to drink it. Something else has got to happen. What's got to happen is that a desire to live has to be born again.

A dead hope has to be quickened. Something deep down in the heart has to happen so that a little quiver of life is felt. Maybe just a little pinhole of hope in the curtain of dread is all it would take.

And then your arguments that this is going to kill you will be precious and you'll put the bottle down. That's the way we humans are. God has given us heads so that we need evidences and arguments and reasons why we should make certain commitments or follow certain paths of behavior.

And God has given us hearts, longings and yearnings and desirings. And therefore, if someone urges you or me to make a certain commitment to something, he has to do two things. He has to persuade your head that the claim he's making is true and really out there and he has to move your heart so that you think it's worth going after, true or not.

We Christians believe, don't we, that God has called us to try to persuade unbelievers about the truth of Christ and that people ought to follow him in the obedience of faith. And I think that implies by the nature of man himself that the church must always be doing two things. Evidences and reasons and arguments must be forthcoming for the truth of this claim that we're making about Jesus.

And there must be, in addition, a demonstration from scripture and from experience that it is infinitely valuable to follow this Jesus. That it makes a difference, that it quenches the deepest soul thirst of the human being and that ultimately that's what all men are longing for. Now, I want to stress that if either of these two things is neglected, truth is jeopardized and humans are dehumanized.

If the church does not have compelling reasons for believing the biblical portrait of Jesus, I think we're acting like animals. That is, we are simply being drawn this way or that by arbitrary incentives, flipping a coin and following whichever it lands. And in the end, faith that doesn't have root in sufficient evidences and reasonable arguments is going to go down in the waves of doubt and skepticism.

And so, my plan for the next seven weeks is something like this. Today and next Sunday, I want to try to make a compelling case that our claim that Jesus is to be followed and that the biblical portrait of him is in fact true. I am today and next Sunday addressing the head perhaps more than the heart, although I don't think the two are ever separated.

The next five Sundays after next Sunday, however, is the other question. If it's true, so what? Is it worth following? Is it worth a commitment? Is it precious? I want to zero in on one feature of the portrait of Jesus that we have in the New Testament, namely, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. And the reason I choose that is fourfold, this feature.

Number one, the resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin or the foundation stone on which everything else rests. If it disintegrates, everything collapses. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15, If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, your faith is vain and you are still in your sins.

The second reason I choose the resurrection to focus on is because that is made the object of faith which saves in the New Testament. Paul said in Romans 10, 9, If we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved. The third reason I choose the resurrection is because the resurrection was just as hard to believe in the first century as it is today.

Sometimes we get the impression people that lived 2,000 years ago were just utterly gullible. Anything went, virgin birth, resurrection from the dead, they believed anything. That's crazy.

They were very skeptical. They knew people didn't rise from the dead. Women who weren't married didn't have babies.

Paul, when he preached in Athens, got laughed to scorn when he mentioned the resurrection. In Corinth, they were saying there is no such thing as a resurrection. In Jerusalem, they wouldn't have it because even though the Jews were very religious, they could only believe in one kind of resurrection, the final resurrection at the end of the world when everybody is raised to judgment.

Paul ran into unbelief everywhere, not gullible acceptance, and therefore I zero in on this truth. And fourth and finally, and the most important reason, is that the preaching of the resurrection in Jerusalem very soon after the death of Jesus is what caused the rise of the church. The birth of the church is owing to the preaching of the resurrection.

The preaching of the resurrection, the willingness of the apostles to suffer and be scorned for it and risk their lives, and the rise of the church because of that, are historical facts that no historian, believer or unbeliever, denies. These are events that nobody seriously disputes, but they have to have a cause, a sufficient cause for why they came about. And the one that commends itself as most probable, I want to try to argue this morning, is that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, left behind an empty tomb, appeared to his disciples and commissioned them to preach and start the church.

Now, here's the way we go about that. You've got to have a source of information, and the main source of information about the earliest days of the church is the book of Acts in the New Testament. The book of

Acts, written by the physician Luke, is the second volume of a two-volume work beginning with Luke, the gospel.

And together they make one history of Jesus and the early church. They were written probably no later than A.D. 64, because at the end of the book of Acts the death of Paul is not recorded, and that was such a magnificent and awful event in the early church. Luke would not have omitted that, I think, in the writing of Acts.

And so Luke and Acts were probably written before the death of Paul, which happened about 64. Therefore, what we have in Acts is a writing which, according to Luke 1.4, was written to persuade a certain official named Theophilus that the things that he had heard are in fact true about Jesus. It has a very defensive or apologetic purpose.

Now, that means, I think, that in trying to describe the things that had happened in the last 30 years or so for Theophilus, Luke would have utterly defeated his case if the gross or general outlines of his history were easily shown to be false. Now, quite apart from whether you believe in the inspiration of Scripture and its infallibility or not, it would be very unwarrantable to assume that the large strokes of how the church began, painted by Luke in Acts, are untrustworthy, because they could be easily checked out by this Roman official Theophilus, and if they were grossly false, Luke's whole case falls to the ground. You might be skeptical about his report of private meetings or his interpretation of the events, but that the overarching structure of what happened in those early days was false is very, very unlikely.

And therefore, I think we may take it as historically assured that the earliest disciples did preach that Jesus was raised from the dead, whether they were mistaken or not, they did preach it. And it was this preaching that gave rise to the early church in Jerusalem, Samaria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy. To illustrate from the book of Acts, Peter, on the day of Pentecost, preached a sermon, this was some seven weeks after the death of Jesus, in which he said, This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, but God raised him up from the dead, loosed the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

This Jesus God raised, and of that we are witnesses. Then, a little later, he was in the temple, and he was preaching a sermon in which he said again to the Jews, You killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead, to this we are witnesses, Acts 3.15. Then in Acts chapter 4, Luke reports that the Sadducees and the captain of the guard became indignant and arrested the apostles, it says in verse 2 of chapter 4, because they were preaching in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They took them before the court, but Annas, Caiaphas, Alexander, and John, Luke explicitly mentions these key figures that Theophilus could check this out with very easily.

And before those leaders, he says, Peter, Whom you crucified, God raised from the dead. Then, they threatened them, released them, and they went right back to their testimony. In Acts chapter 4, verse 33, they gave testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Then they were arrested again. They were put in jail. During the night, they managed to escape.

They went right back to preaching in the temple the next day. They were arrested again. And in Acts chapter 5, verses 29 and 32, here's the way they defend themselves for the last time in that setting.

We must obey God rather than men. Then the God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and Savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

We are witnesses to these things. And that enraged the council. They were about to kill them, but Gamaliel, Paul's teacher, advised a lesser punishment.

So they flogged them and sent them out. And Luke records, they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day in the temple and at home, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Now, all students of antiquity, whether believer or unbeliever, agree that's not a fabrication. They may have been dead wrong about the resurrection, but that's what they preached. And the way they behaved, that was public.

It was for everybody to see. And Theophilus could have checked it out very easily. Luke couldn't have risked painting such a grossly false presentation of what went on in those early weeks after the death of Jesus.

They became convinced that he was raised from the dead somehow. They preached that he was raised. They risked their lives joyfully for that preaching, and the church grew and became numerous in Jerusalem and then spread throughout the Roman world.

The greatest question then that has to be asked is, what was the cause of all that? Where did all that get started? What sparked that in the lives of the disciples? And the answer of the apostles in chapter 2, verse 32, is this Jesus, God raised from the dead of that we are witnesses. Now, there are two infinitely important questions that every one of you and I have to answer. And the first one is, is that true? And the second one is, if so, will we follow him? The devil knows it's true, and therefore the second question is just as important as the first.

But, how do you go about verifying such a claim? It's an audacious claim. This Jesus whom you crucified is raised from the dead. Well, there are three ways that we generally in daily life try to verify whether or not what people claim to be true is in fact true.

And you know what they are, you use them all the time. The first one is, we assess their character. Do they have integrity? Have they shown themselves to be reliable? Are they sober-minded or are they unstable sorts? That goes a long way to helping us.

If a person has proved himself trustworthy in our experience, we'll take a lot more from that person than we might from somebody who is a little bit spacey. Second, we assess the extenuating circumstances surrounding their claim and we ask, is there something in their lives or in the surrounding situation that might be constraining them to make this claim deceptively or mistakenly? For example, have they been on drugs or is somebody holding their children hostage so that they're saying what they're saying, which really isn't so. All kinds of things might constrain a reliable person to say what he does not mean.

And then the third means we use of telling whether somebody is telling the truth is, we assess the claim itself. We try to get a picture of the totality of the truth that they're calling us to believe and we see whether it fits our experience, whether it starts to make sense out of reality, whether it causes the world to cohere or to disintegrate further. Does it offer plausible answers to life's most pressing questions? That's another

way we go about trying to verify whether somebody's claim is true or not.

And I think we use either one or usually a combination of these three in trying to determine whether somebody's claim is true. We ought to do that. It is not an honor to God or Jesus or you to flip a coin and choose your faith.

That's bad. There ought to be sufficient reasons and evidences that the claims you are bowing to are, in fact, true. Now, in the weeks to come, I hope to say things that will show that the writers of Scripture have integrity.

They are sober minded viewers of the world. They are not spacey. They're not unstable.

And I hope also to paint a portrait of the totality of the New Testament claim about Jesus so that it begins to simply commend itself to your experience of the world because it starts to make sense out of things that are puzzling. It starts to answer the deep, gnawing questions of death and life and origins and eternity. But this morning, I want to zero in on that second way of verification and look with you at the circumstances surrounding this claim on the part of the apostles.

This Jesus, God raised, and we are witnesses. Are there extenuating circumstances that we can find out that would show this claim to have been a fraud or innocently mistaken? First of all, I think we can rest assured that the tomb of Jesus was empty. And the reason we can have that assurance is because the preaching of Jesus as raised from the dead couldn't have lasted one hour in Jerusalem had that tomb not been empty.

Could it? Those authorities were so dead against this preaching, had they said Jesus is raised and the authorities could have pointed to the tomb where Jesus lay smoldering in the grave, it would have been over. Maybe 30 minutes it could have lasted. And it never was stopped.

The closest that the authorities could come, there's a little reflection of this in Justin's apology to Trifo and in the Gospel of Matthew, the closest they could come was by bribing the soldiers to say that the apostles stole the body during the night and the rumor spread throughout the Jews. Well, the way to account for this is that the apostles stole the body. That suggestion that the apostles were therefore intentionally pushing on the world a fraud encounters an insurmountable objection.

Namely, they were risking their lives for it. It is just as improbable that a person will risk his life for what he knows to be a fraud that it is that someone rise from the dead. It doesn't happen.

It's a conundrum. It doesn't make sense. It's historically very improbable.

Therefore, most critics don't buy that. They say rather that it was hallucinations. It was some kind of vision that the apostles had and Jesus was not raised in any bodily sense, but they wanted him to be.

So bad that their imaginations got carried away and they saw him and they really believed that that figment of their imaginations was him and in all confidence began to preach that he was raised from the dead. But now, what's the evidence for such a claim? Where is there a clue to set your foot on historically that such a hypothesis can be so? The disciples were not unstable visionary sorts that are easily given to hallucinating. What we know of them from the gospels is that they were ordinary, run-of-the-mill, practical, everyday business sorts who did not get carried away very easily.

In fact, every gospel that records an appearance of Jesus to the disciples says they didn't believe it. They were stubborn as could be. They were hard-headed.

They did not believe easily. They were not gullible types at all. They did not expect that Jesus was going to be raised.

They had to have their arms twisted in order to get that through their heads. If the extant reports that we do have are credible at all and it's very unlikely that the church would invent such uncomplimentary pictures of the apostles. You put that together with this fact.

What the apostles preached was a resurrection that was unheard of anywhere in their Jewish tradition. A bodily resurrection, an exaltation to God's right hand, and most importantly they viewed this resurrection of Jesus not as an isolated resuscitation like Lazarus but as a first fruits of the final resurrection that was to come at the end of the age. This was unique.

It was a new understanding. What they preached had no precedent in Israel at all and therefore a new explanation had to be found and the most probable explanation is that what they said to be the reason was in fact the reason they had seen the risen Lord. No matter how hard a person searches for a non-supernatural explanation of the preaching of the resurrection, that person always runs into historical improbabilities.

Improbabilities which are just as great as the improbability that the Jesus of the Gospels could be raised from the dead and therefore the explanation of the apostles does commend itself to the open mind. The Jesus of the Gospels, God raised from the dead and of that we are witnesses. All things considered the resurrection of Jesus is more probable than delusion or intentional fabrication by the apostles and therefore I think we have good historical basis for affirming that Jesus rose from the dead and that this is an essential part of the portrait of the Jesus of history.

Now when you combine that as I hope we do in the weeks to come, when you combine that with the apostles interpretation of what that resurrection means for us today and for the world and when you start to see the mysteries of life falling into place because that Jesus is held up before you as Lord and when your sins start to fall away because his resurrection certifies the sufficiency of his atoning death and when you find your lives renewed and your soul empowered for authentic love then you will know that you have a foundation that is so sure you can say with all confidence to the whole world if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

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