

Jesus Is Precious Because His Biblical Portrait Is True

by John Piper

The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christian teaching and the proof of Jesus' divinity, and it is supported by historical evidence and the improbability of alternative explanations.

Topics: "Resurrection Of Jesus", "Christian Apologetics"

Description

John Piper emphasizes the importance of persuading both the mind and the heart in leading people to follow Christ. He explains that providing evidence for the truth of Jesus and demonstrating His worth are essential in the church's mission. Piper focuses on the resurrection of Jesus, highlighting its foundational significance, the necessity of belief in it for salvation, the historical context of skepticism, and its central role in early Christian preaching. He challenges believers and unbelievers to critically assess the claim of Jesus' resurrection and its implications for their lives.

Transcript

Part One

February 7, 1982

1 Corinthians 15:17

Suppose that you go to visit a person who does not know how to read English and is about to drink a bottle of iodine. Because of your compassion and natural love of life you feel obliged to stop him. To stop him without force, you will have to persuade him of two things. First, you must persuade him that iodine is poison and may kill him. You will amass your evidence: "Look, this mark on the label means, Don't drink it. It is made to put on the skin. Look here are the instructions. Take my word for it. My experience is reliable. I have no reason to lie to you." You build your case and he is persuaded. You have convinced him. His doubts are gone. He is converted to your opinion.

But he puts the bottle to his lips and begins to drink. "Wait," you say, "Do you want to kill yourself?" And he says, "Yes." And you immediately realize that if you want to save his life, there is a second thing he must be persuaded of--the value of living. You can convince him with irrefutable arguments that he is dead if he drinks and alive if he doesn't. But none of those arguments will save him if he doesn't care. If his

depression is great, and his heart is heavy and his mind is stifled with frustration, proof that iodine is poison is powerless to save.

Something else has to happen. His desire to live has to be born again. Somehow his dead hope needs to come alive again. Something has to happen deep in his heart so that all of a sudden he senses a quiver of life. A pinhole of hope in the curtain of dread may be all it takes. And if in that instant the love of life is born anew, then your arguments about the way to life will be very precious. And he will put the bottle down.

That's the way we are as humans. We have heads, and therefore must be given facts and evidences and arguments in order to make reasonable commitments. And we have hearts with longings and yearnings and hopes and fears and desires. Therefore, if someone urges me to commit myself to a certain goal, he must persuade my head that the goal is really there as he says it is; and he must move my heart to feel the value of attaining it.

We Christians believe that God has called us to persuade men and women and children to follow Christ in the obedience of faith. The very nature of man requires, therefore, that two things be happening in the church all the time. Evidences and reasons and arguments must be forthcoming that the Jesus we are summoning people to follow is in fact real. We must maintain a reasonable case that his Biblical portrait is true. But in addition, we must also demonstrate that he is worth following. We must show from Scripture and experience that this Jesus is not only true, but that he quenches the deepest soul thirst of all humans--that he is ultimately what all people long for.

I want to stress that if either of these efforts is neglected in the church, truth is jeopardized and people are dehumanized. If the church has no compelling reasons for believing the Biblical portrait of Jesus, then we are acting like well-trained animals who can be turned this way and that by arbitrary incentives. And in the end, faith that is not rooted in sufficient evidences will go down in the waves of doubt and skepticism.

Christianity has been criticized in modern times as a mythological means of wish-fulfillment, the opiate of the masses. That is, people follow Christ not because they have sufficient reason to believe he is true, but because some of the things he offers seem to fulfill their wishes. That may be a legitimate assessment of some believers, but let's play fair at this game. Is it not true that just as many unbelievers have adopted their pattern of life not because of a careful and critical sifting of the evidences for the ultimate truth and value of their philosophy, but rather because it seems to meet their needs and fulfill their wishes. The dagger cuts both ways. My point is that we go against the way we are made if we neglect the question of truth and the use of our reason in apprehending it.

Therefore, my plan for the months of February and March is twofold: to begin with a brief, but I hope compelling, case for the truth of the Biblical portrait of Jesus. And then, in five messages, to show that this portrait is more to be desired than any other reality in the world. My aim for believers is to strengthen the fiber of your faith in truth and quicken your love for Christ. And my aim for unbelievers is to persuade you, head and heart, without any manipulation, that the Biblical portrait of Jesus is true and infinitely precious.

In the limited time we have this morning, I will focus on only one feature of the Biblical portrait of Jesus: the claim that he was raised from the dead. I focus on the resurrection of Jesus for four reasons. 1) It is the foundation of Christian teaching; if it disintegrates, everything collapses. The apostle Paul said, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). 2) It is the object we must have confidence in if we are to be saved. Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, "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." 3) The

possibility of resurrection from the dead was not any more believed in those days than it is today. Paul had to deal with the problem of skepticism at Athens, where he was laughed at because of preaching the resurrection (Acts 17:18), and at Corinth, where people were denying that there was any such thing as resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12), and in Jerusalem where the only resurrection imaginable (to the Pharisees only, Acts 23:8) was the resurrection of everyone at the end of the world on the day of judgment (Acts 24:15). First century people were not any more prone to believe the report of a resurrection than we are.

4) Fourth and main reason I focus on the resurrection of Jesus is that it was the heart of the earliest Christian preaching in Jerusalem and it was this preaching of the resurrection which gave rise to the church. The preaching of the resurrection, the willingness of the apostles to suffer for it and the rise of the church are historical facts denied by no serious historian regardless of his faith. But these events must have a sufficient cause. And the one that commends itself as most probable is that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, that he left behind an empty tomb and that he appeared to his disciples. I'll try to show why I think this is so.

Our main source of information about those early days of the church soon after Jesus' death is the book of Acts in the New Testament. Together, with the gospel of Luke, it forms a two volume work written by Luke, the Physician, for a certain official named Theophilus. Luke says in Luke 1:4 that his aim is to persuade Theophilus of the truth of the things he has heard regarding Jesus. The books (Luke and Acts) were written probably no later than A.D. 64 (since Acts doesn't mention Paul's death). Therefore, what we have in Acts is a book intended to persuade a Roman official of the truth of things which happened in the last 30 years or so. Even if one rejects the divine inspiration of Scripture, it would be highly unwarranted to assume that Luke's description of public and verifiable events would be grossly inaccurate. If we are skeptical, we might be suspicious of Luke's interpretation of these events or of his reports of private meetings and conversations. But even the skeptic should not doubt Luke's broad and general description of the rise of the church in Jerusalem. If it were a gross distortion, Theophilus could discover that very easily and then Luke's whole purpose is down the tubes.

Therefore, we may take it to be historically assured that, whether or not the earliest disciples of Jesus were mistaken, they did preach that Jesus was raised from the dead and it was this preaching in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy which gave rise to the Christian Church.

To illustrate: seven weeks after Jesus' death the apostle Peter preached a sermon in Jerusalem 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 having loosed the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it... This Jesus God raised up and of that we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:23-24,32). Some time later, Peter addressed the people of Jerusalem in the temple and said, "You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses" (Acts 3:15). Then in Acts 4, Luke reports that the Sadducees and captain of the temple arrested the apostles precisely for "proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2). When they were brought to trial before Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander (4:6) Peter said that they were only acting in the name of Jesus "whom you crucified but God raised from the dead" (4:10). Note well how Luke mentions key religious and political figures. Such things can easily be checked out by Theophilus, his reader. The rulers threatened the apostles and released them. And Acts 4:33 says they continued to "give their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." So they were arrested a second time and put in prison (Acts 5:17,18). That night they escaped and were found the next day again teaching in the temple

for all to hear. They were arrested again, but defended themselves saying, "We must obey God rather than men. 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. And we are witnesses to these things" (Acts 5:29-32). This enraged the council and they wanted to kill the apostles, but Gamaliel argued for a lighter judgment. So they flogged them and put them out. And Luke says, "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" (Acts 5:41,42).

Virtually all students of antiquity agree that this is not fabrication. The church in Jerusalem grew up because the followers of Jesus, soon after his death, became convinced he had been raised from the dead, they preached it in public and before religious and political authorities and they were willing to endure suffering and the risk of death to give their testimony. Those are historical facts. The greatest question of history is: What caused these things? The answer of the apostles was, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). One of the two most important decisions any of you will ever face is this one: Is the claim by Peter and James and John and Andrew and Philip and Matthew and Thomas and the others true or false? (The other decision is: if it's true will I follow him?).

How can we go about verifying this claim? There are three ways we generally follow in trying to decide if someone is telling the truth. One is an assessment of their character. Do they have integrity? Are they sober-minded? If someone has won our trust we will accept from them as true claims we might reject from other unstable people. Second, we take stock of extenuating circumstances to see if there may be some unusual cause for the person to be mistaken or fraudulent. For example, have they been on some mood-altering drug or is someone holding their child hostage, etc.? Third, we consider the implications of their claim. We listen to the totality of their case and then test it to see whether it coheres with our experience of the world and is logically consistent. Does their claim start to make sense out of life and death and eternity or does it cause our experience of the world simply to disintegrate further. Does it offer plausible answers to life's deepest and most pressing questions? In one or more of these three ways we should seek to decide whether someone is telling the truth. We should not flip a coin. There should be reasons for why we credit a person's claim to truth.

In the weeks to come, I hope to speak of things that will show the Biblical authors and Jesus himself to have integrity and I hope to portray their claims in such a way that they begin to make sense out of your experience and commend themselves as a total philosophy of life which meets the deepest longings of the human heart. But in conclusion this morning, I want to argue briefly (by the second way of verification) that there are no extenuating circumstances in the lives of the apostles which would account for their being deceived about Jesus' resurrection or their pushing it as a fraud.

First of all, we may rest assured that the gospel reports of the empty tomb are true (Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:3; Matt. 28:1-8). The reason for this assurance is that the preaching of the resurrection could not have lasted in Jerusalem for a single hour if the authorities could have pointed to the body of Jesus. The empty tomb was indisputable and the only recourse of the authorities was to spread the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body (Matt. 28:11-15).

But the suggestion that the disciples were intentionally pushing a fraud onto the world runs into an insurmountable difficulty. It would mean that the disciples were risking their lives for what they knew to be a fraud. And that is contrary to human experience as a resurrection from the dead. So some critics have

suggested the disciples all experienced hallucinations. They were so eager for Jesus to live that their imaginations got the best of them and they saw him alive and really believed he was. But what is the evidence for this suggestion? The disciples were not unstable visionary sorts from what we know of them. On the contrary, the gospels testify that after the death of Jesus the disciples had given up hope (Luke 24:21) and that they were very skeptical and slow to believe when Jesus appeared to them (Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:11; John 20:24-29). There is no evidence to support the notion that the disciples were of such a mind set as to hallucinate that Jesus was raised from the dead. This is especially true when you consider that their specific understanding of Jesus' resurrection as a bodily one, involving an exaltation to God's right hand and signifying the beginning of the general resurrection (Acts 4:2; 1 Cor. 15:23), was unheard of in traditional Jewish thinking. It is a new proclamation and therefore probably stems from a new experience, namely the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his authoritative interpretation of that event.

No matter how hard one searches for a non-supernatural explanation of the preaching of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem, one always encounters historical improbabilities. Therefore, the explanation of the apostles commends itself to the open mind, "This Jesus God raised up. Of that we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). All things considered, the resurrection of Jesus is more probable than delusion or intentional fabrication by the apostles. Therefore, we have good historical reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And when this is combined with the apostles' interpretation of what that resurrection means for us and for the world, and we see the mysteries of life falling into place, and our sins forgiven and our lives renewed and empowered for authentic love, then we have an unshakable foundation and can say with 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."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/jesus-is-precious-because-his-biblical-portrait-is-true/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net