

# The Case for Christianity

## Lesson 7 Part Two of – Did Christ Rise from the Dead?

<sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." <sup>39</sup> But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. <sup>40</sup> For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. -**Mathew 12: 38-40 (ESV)**



Bernard Ramm -  
Theologian and  
Apologist

"Taking the Gospel record as faithful history there can be no doubt that Christ Himself anticipated His death and resurrection, and plainly declared it to His disciples.... The gospel writers are quite frank to admit that such predictions really did not penetrate their minds till the resurrection was a fact. But the evidence is there from the mouth of our Lord that He would come back from the dead after three days. He told them that He would be put to death violently, through the cause of hatred, and would rise the third day. All this came to pass." – **Bernard Ramm (20<sup>th</sup> Cent. Baptist Theologian & Apologist)**

<sup>31</sup> And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." – **Mark 8: 31-33 (ESV)**



Wilbur Smith -  
20th Century  
Biblical Scholar

"That Jesus said He was going up to Jerusalem to die is not so remarkable, though all the details He gave about that death, weeks and months before He died, are together a prophetic phenomenon. But when He said that He himself would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say, if he expected longer the devotion of any disciples, unless — He was sure He was going to rise. No founder of any world religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that!" – **Wilbur Smith (20<sup>th</sup> Century Biblical Scholar)**

### Jesus' Postmortem Appearances

**1 Corinthians 15: 3-8 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is a truly remarkable claim. We have here an indisputably authentic letter of a man personally acquainted with the first disciples, and he reports that they actually saw Jesus alive after His death. More than that, he says that he himself also saw an appearance of Jesus. What are we to make of this claim? Did Jesus really appear to people alive after His death? To answer this question, let's examine the evidence for the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

### Paul's List of Eyewitnesses

#### 1) Appearance to Peter

We have no story in the gospels providing details of Jesus' appearance to Peter. But the appearance is mentioned here in the old Christian tradition quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians, which originated in the Jerusalem church, and it's vouched for by the apostle Paul himself.

As we know from Galatians 1: 18 (<sup>18</sup> Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.), Paul spent about two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem three years after his conversion on the Damascus road. So Paul knew personally whether Peter claimed to have had such an experience or not.

In addition to this, the appearance to Peter is mentioned in another old Christian tradition found in **Luke 24: 34**: (*"The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"*). So although we have no story of the appearance to Peter, it is quite well founded historically. As a result, virtually all New Testament critics agree that Peter saw an appearance of Jesus alive from the dead.

## 2) Appearance to the Twelve Apostles

The group referred to here is that original group of twelve disciples who had been chosen by Jesus during His ministry— minus Judas, whose absence didn't affect the formal title of the group. This is the best-attested resurrection appearance of Jesus. It, too, is included in the very early traditional formula that Paul cites, and Paul himself had contact with members of the Twelve.



Also, we have independent stories of this appearance in:

**Luke 24: 36 – 42 (ESV)** <sup>36</sup> As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" <sup>37</sup> But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup> They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate before them.

Also, **John 20: 19 – 20 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

The most notable feature of these appearance stories is the physical demonstrations of Jesus' showing His wounds and eating before the disciples. The purpose of the physical demonstrations is to show two things: **First**, that Jesus was raised physically; and **Second**, that He was the same Jesus who had been crucified.

There can be little doubt that such an appearance occurred, for it is attested in the old Christian tradition, vouched for by Paul, who had personal contact with the Twelve, and is independently described by both Luke and John.

## 3) Appearance to five hundred brethren

The third appearance is a bit of a surprise: *"Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time"*. This is surprising, since we have no mention whatsoever of this appearance elsewhere in the New Testament. This might make us rather skeptical about this appearance, but Paul himself apparently had personal contact with these people, since he knew that some had died. This is seen in Paul's parenthetical comment, "most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep."

Why does Paul add this remark? The great New Testament scholar of Cambridge University, C. H. Dodd, replies, "There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the 500 are still alive, unless Paul is saying, in effect, 'The witnesses are there to be questioned.'" (C. H. Dodd, *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1968), 128.)

Notice, Paul could never have said this if the event had not occurred. He could not have challenged people to talk to the witnesses if the event had never taken place and there were no witnesses. But evidently there were witnesses to this event, and Paul knew that some of them had died in the meantime. Therefore, the event must surely have taken place.

#### 4) Appearance to James

The next appearance is one of the most amazing of all: Jesus appeared to James, His younger brother. What makes this amazing is that apparently neither James nor any of Jesus' younger brothers believed in Jesus during His lifetime.

**Mark 3: 21 (ESV)** <sup>21</sup> *And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."*

**John 7: 3– 5 (ESV)** <sup>3</sup> *So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing."* <sup>4</sup> *For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world."* <sup>5</sup> *For not even his brothers believed in him.*



By the criterion of embarrassment, this is doubtless a historical fact of Jesus' life and ministry. But after the resurrection, Jesus' brothers show up in the Christian fellowship in the upper room in Jerusalem...

**Acts 1: 14 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> *All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.*

Also, in **Acts 12: 17**, after Peter is freed from prison by an angel of the Lord, his first words are "Report this to James." In **Galatians 1: 19** Paul tells of his two-week visit to Jerusalem about three years after his Damascus Road experience. He says that besides Peter, he saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. Paul at least implies that James was now being recognized as an apostle.

And, when Paul visited Jerusalem again fourteen years later, he says there were three "pillars" of the church in Jerusalem: Peter, John, and James (**Gal. 2: 9**).

Finally, in **Acts 21: 18**, James is the sole head of the Jerusalem church and of the council of elders. We hear no more about James in the New Testament; but from Josephus, the Jewish historian, we learn that James was stoned to death illegally by the Sanhedrin sometime after AD 60 (Antiquities 20.200).

Not only James but also Jesus' other brothers became believers and were active in Christian preaching, as we see from...

**1 Corinthians 9: 5 (ESV)** <sup>5</sup> *Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?*

Now, how is this to be explained? On the one hand, it seems certain that Jesus' brothers did not believe in Him during His lifetime. Jesus' crucifixion would only confirm in James' mind that his elder brother's messianic pretensions were delusory, just as he had thought.

The fact that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him during his lifetime, but were willing to **die** for their belief in him after his crucifixion, is powerful. Even the skeptical New Testament critic Hans Grass admits

that the conversion of James is one of the surest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Hans Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 80.)

### 5) Appearance to “all the apostles.”

This appearance was probably to a limited circle of Christian missionaries somewhat wider than the Twelve who had firsthand contact with Christ during his ministry. We find an example of who might be members of this group in...

**Acts 1: 21 – 22 (ESV)** <sup>21</sup> *So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,* <sup>22</sup> *beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection."*

Once again, the fact of this appearance is bolstered by Paul’s personal contact with the apostles themselves.

### 6) Appearance to Saul of Tarsus

The final appearance is just as amazing as the appearance to James: “Last of all,” says Paul, “he appeared to me also.” The story of Jesus’ appearance to Saul of Tarsus (or Paul) just outside Damascus is related in...



**Acts 9: 1 - 9 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest* <sup>2</sup> *and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.* <sup>3</sup> *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.* <sup>4</sup> *And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* <sup>5</sup> *And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.* <sup>6</sup> *But rise and enter the city, and you will*

*be told what you are to do."* <sup>7</sup> *The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.* <sup>8</sup> *Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.* <sup>9</sup> *And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

That this event actually occurred is established beyond doubt by Paul’s references to it in his own letters.

This event changed Saul’s whole life. He was a rabbi, a Pharisee, a respected Jewish leader. He hated the Christian heresy and did everything in his power to stamp it out. He tells us that he was even responsible for the execution of Christian believers. Then suddenly he gave up everything.

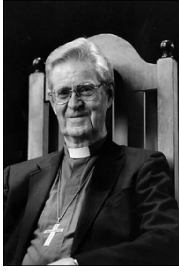


Gerd Ludemann  
German New  
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He left his position as a respected Jewish leader and became a Christian missionary: He entered a life of poverty, labor, and suffering. He was whipped, beaten, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked three times, in constant danger, deprivation, and anxiety. Finally, he made the ultimate sacrifice and was martyred for his faith at Rome. And it was all because of what he experienced on that road to Damascus, an appearance by Christ himself.

Some skeptics have attempted to explain Paul’s radical transformation on the road to Damascus by attributing it to a hallucination brought on by extreme emotional and

psychological guilt resulting from his aggressive persecution of the new Christian “cult”. The German New Testament scholar Gerd Ludemann is one of the most prominent in professing this belief.



Krister Stendahl  
Swedish Theologian  
and New Testament  
Scholar (1921-2008)

However, the evidence we have suggests that Paul did **not** struggle with a guilt complex as Lüdemann supposes. Nearly fifty years ago the Swedish scholar Krister Stendahl pointed out that Western readers have tended to interpret Paul in light of Martin Luther’s struggles with guilt and sin. But Paul the Pharisee experienced no such struggle.

Stendahl writes:

*“Contrast Paul, a very happy and successful Jew, one who can say “As to righteousness under the Law (I was) blameless” (Phil. 3: 6). That is what he says. He experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience. He is a star pupil, the student to get the thousand-dollar graduate scholarship in Gamaliel’s Seminary.... Nowhere in Paul’s writings is there any indication ... that psychologically Paul had some problem of conscience.” (Krister Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 12– 13.)*

In summary, Paul’s testimony makes it historically certain that various individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus after His death and burial.

From this evidence what should we conclude? We can call these appearances hallucinations if we want to, but we cannot deny that they occurred. Even the skeptical critic Gerd Lüdemann is emphatic:

*“It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.” (Gerd Lüdemann, What Really Happened to Jesus?, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 80.)*

The evidence makes it certain that on separate occasions different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead. This conclusion is virtually indisputable.

## The Resurrection Appearances Were Physical in Nature

The New Testament, makes a distinction between an appearance of Jesus and a vision of Jesus. The appearances of Jesus soon ceased, but visions of Jesus continued in the early church. Now the question is: What is the difference between an appearance and a vision?

The answer of the New Testament seems to be clear: A vision, though caused by God, was purely in the mind, while an appearance, took place “out there” in the external world. For example, let’s compare the resurrection appearance of Jesus’ to the apostles in the upper room, with Stephen’s vision of Jesus in Acts chapter 7.

**Luke 24: 36 – 42 (ESV)** <sup>36</sup> As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” <sup>37</sup> But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? <sup>39</sup> **See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.**” <sup>40</sup> And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, **“Have you anything here to eat?”** <sup>42</sup> **They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and he took it and ate before them.**

**Acts 7: 54 - 58 (ESV)** <sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.



Though Stephen saw an identifiable, bodily image, what he saw was a vision of a man, not a man who was physically there, for no one else present experienced anything at all. By contrast the resurrection appearances took place in the world “out there” and could be experienced by anybody present.

The gospel accounts show that the resurrection appearances were physical and bodily in form. The unanimous testimony of the gospels in this regard is quite impressive. If none of the appearances was originally a physical, bodily appearance, then it's very strange that we have a completely unanimous testimony in the gospels that **all** of them were physical, with no trace of the supposed original, nonphysical appearances. Such a thorough corruption of oral tradition in so short a time, while the original eyewitnesses were still about, is most unlikely.

## The Origin of the Christian Faith

Christianity sprang into being sometime midway through the first century AD. Why did it come into existence? What caused this movement to begin? Even skeptical New Testament scholars recognize that the Christian faith owes its origin to the belief of the earliest disciples that God had raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. They pinned everything on this belief.

Jews were looking for a Messiah who would conquer Israel's enemies, not be shamefully executed by them as a criminal. The Messiah was supposed to be a triumphant figure who would command the respect of Jew and Gentile alike and who would establish the throne of David in Jerusalem. A Messiah who failed to deliver and to reign, who was defeated, humiliated, and slain by His enemies, is a contradiction in terms.

The Jewish conception of resurrection differed greatly from the experiences they had with the resurrected Christ. In Jewish thinking the resurrection to glory and immortality always occurred after the end of the world. Jews had no idea of a resurrection within history. Most likely, this is why the disciples had so much trouble understanding Jesus' predictions of His own resurrection. They thought He was talking about the resurrection at the end of the world.



**Mark 9: 9– 11 (ESV),** <sup>9</sup> *And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. <sup>11</sup> And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"*

In first-century Judaism it was believed the prophet Elijah would come again before the judgment day when the dead would be raised. The disciples could not understand the idea of a resurrection occurring within history prior to the end of the world. Hence, Jesus' predictions only confused them.

That's why it's difficult to overemphasize what a disaster the crucifixion would have been for the disciples' faith. Jesus' death on the cross would have spelled a humiliating end for any hopes they had entertained that He was the Messiah.

And, this is exactly the state of mind we find them in immediately after Christ's crucifixion...

**John 20: 19 (ESV)** <sup>19</sup> *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."*

But, the resurrection of Jesus reversed the catastrophe of the crucifixion. Because God had raised Jesus from the dead, He was seen to be Messiah after all. Thus, Peter proclaims in...

**Acts 2: 23 – 36:** *"This man ... God raised.... Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."*

The change in the lives of the apostles after Jesus' crucifixion is inexplicable in the absence of his resurrection appearances. As critics have universally recognized, you can't plausibly deny that the earliest disciples sincerely believed that Jesus was risen from the dead. They staked their very lives on that conviction.

From various sources, including the New Testament itself, apocryphal texts, early Christian historians, legends and lore, we find that all but one of the apostles gave their lives due to their unshakeable faith in Christ after the resurrection appearances...



- **Peter:** Was martyred in Rome during the reign of the emperor Nero. As the story goes, Peter asked to be crucified upside down, so that his death would not be the equal of Jesus and the Romans supposedly obliged.

- **Andrew:** According to 15th Century religious historian Dorman Newman, Andrew—the brother of Peter—went to Patras in western Greece in 69 AD, where the Roman proconsul Aegeates debated religion with him. Aegeates tried to convince Andrew to forsake Christianity, so that he would not have to torture and execute him. But when that didn't work, apparently he decided to give

Andrew the full treatment. Andrew was scourged, and then tied rather than nailed to a cross, so that he would suffer for a longer time before dying. Andrew lived for two days, during which he preached to passersby.

- **James (son of Zebedee, AKA James the Greater):** Acts 12:1-19 says that James was killed with a sword. The newly-appointed governor of Judea, Herod Agrippa, decided to ingratiate himself with the Romans by persecuting leaders of the new sect.

- **Philip:** Philip, the first of Jesus' disciples, became a missionary in Asia. Eventually, he traveled to the Egyptian city of Heliopolis, where he was scourged, thrown into prison, and crucified in 54 AD.

- **Bartholomew:** Bartholomew supposedly preached in several countries, including India, where he translated the Gospel of Matthew for believers. In one account, "impatient idolaters" beat Bartholomew and then crucified him, while in another, he was skinned alive and then beheaded.



- **Thomas:** Apparently preached the gospel in Greece and India, where he angered local religious authorities, who martyred him by running him through with a spear.

- **Matthew:** According to legend, the former tax collector turned missionary was martyred in Ethiopia, where he was supposedly stabbed in the back by a swordsman sent by King Hertacus, after he criticized the king's morals.

- **James (son of Alphaeus, AKA James the Less):** James, who was elected by his fellow believers to head the churches of Jerusalem, was one of the longest-lived apostles, perhaps exceeded only by John. At the age of 94, he was beaten and stoned by persecutors, and then killed by being hit in the head with a club.

- **Thaddaeus, AKA Lebbaeus, Judas or Jude:** According to several stories, he was crucified at Edessa (the name of cities in both Turkey and Greece) in 72 AD.

- **Simon the Canaanite AKA the Zealot:** Simon preached in Mauritania on the west coast of Africa, and then went to England, where he was crucified in 74 AD.

- **John:** John was the only one of the original disciples not to die a violent death. Instead, he passed away peacefully in Patmos in his old age, sometime around 100 AD.

