



Is the Resurrection Essential?

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 | Jonathan K. Dodson

Over the next four weeks we will be doubting the resurrection in order to find Jesus, working through 1 Cor 15. Is belief in resurrection essential? All scholars agree that Jesus died by crucifixion, but some insist there isn't enough historical evidence to warrant belief in an actual resurrection. *Essential or optional?* Let's look at the resurrection through: the Gospel Tradition, Skeptical Scholarship, and Faith.

Gospel Tradition

Concluding his long letter to the church in the city of Corinth, Paul writes: “**Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain**” (1:1). For the early Christians, church was not something they attended; it was something they were, *wherever they went, at home or at work, in groups or going out*, they didn't leave this identity behind—family in Christ Jesus. Paul gives us a family reminder of what creates deep community—the gospel. In fact, he says if we deviate from the gospel, it puts us in grave danger “believing in vain.” Put positively, the gospel is of *first importance*. **This means it has priority over all other teachings and all of your life.** It is more important than your career, your friends, your future, your preferences. It is this: “**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 Cephas, then to the twelve**” (3-5). **The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus for our sins is the essential, life-changing, world-altering gospel message.** It announces hopeful news “according to the Scriptures.” Did you notice he repeated this? Why? This is not a way of saying, “See, this was all about Jesus predicted in the OT so you should believe it,” as if to one-up skeptics with prophecy. Rather, Paul is appealing to the Scriptures as a rich, ancient, live narrative about the world, which hinges on the Messiah. That's what “Christ” means. According to the Scriptures is shorthand for true story. In this true story, the messiah has come to deal with the sin of Israel *and the world*. This is why he says in Galatians: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age**” (1:4). *According to the Scriptures*, Christ is the hero of the world story. He exchanges divine grace for personal sin. He replaces evil with peace. **The gospel is the story of God bringing Israel's messiah onto the world stage to make a new humanity fit for a new world. Now, is this a true story?** Well, it isn't something Paul made up. It is the result of Jesus' teachings on the Scriptures and is something he *received*. This is a technical word referring to the transmission of a tradition. Jesus died in the 30s, Paul is writing in the 50s, had already taught it to Corinth, and now says it is Christian tradition. Puts it at least 45AD. But for it to become a tradition it had to be a decade old. So that puts it around 35. NT Wright notes it was probably formulated within the first two or three years after the first Easter. This gospel creed is very close to the source. Now let's take a closer look at this tradition by breaking into three parts: died for our sins, buried, raised on the third day.

Skeptical Scholarship

Paul says Jesus [died for our sins](#). Virtually no scholar has an issue with the historicity of Jesus death on a cross. It's an accepted fact. But the claim that this was divine atonement to deal with human sin is another matter. What gives Jesus the right to say he died for our sins? Who says we need saving? Well, our **conscience** does. Everyone encounters guilt for certain actions. Maybe for how you have treated some person, things you've done in the past. This sense of guilt is a gift from God. If we didn't have guilt over things like adultery, murder, gossip humanity would do them all the time. Why not do them if there isn't a transcendent standard for human flourishing? Where does that come from? It comes from a transcendent being, God. So while we may not like admitting we need saving, the reality is that our guilt is a gift, to help society but more importantly to alert us to our need rescue before God. When Jesus dies for sins, he offers to absorb our guilt. If you accept it, your become guilt free before God. If you don't you will have to absorb the consequences for your guilt in this life and the next. Next Paul says that Jesus [was buried](#). There is skeptical scholarship regarding this phrase. Bart Ehrman, formerly a believing Christian New Testament scholar now an agnostic biblical historian, was interviewed on NPR this week and also just released an important book called *When Jesus Became God*. There has been a response book called *When God Became Jesus*. Unfortunately, they did not respond to his chapters on the resurrection. Ehrman points out that Paul makes no mention of the empty tomb in this tradition, and contends that the reason for this is that there was no empty tomb, that in fact the disciples who wrote the Gospels, like Mark, made up the empty tomb idea. To prove this, he says the tradition would have had a neater **parallel** to "appearing to Cephas" if it read "buried by Joseph of Arimathea." But this reliable tradition cited by Paul does not include Joseph. Why? He points out that Joseph was part of the "whole council of the Sanhedrin" (Mark 15:1) which condemned Jesus to death. Why, then would Joseph suddenly become an advocate for Jesus burial? Surely this was made up to make sure there is a tomb story to go with Jesus death, so people can later claim an empty tomb. What really happened, Ehrman suggests, is that Jesus body was left on the cross and **devoured by dogs**. No tomb, empty or otherwise. I honestly find this hard to believe, not on the grounds of theology but on the grounds of history. *First*, it is quite an elaborate, alternate reading based on speculation, an argument from silence (there are no documents supporting this and there would have been clear documentary outcry if this is actually what happened). *Second*, the more natural reading would be that Joseph, upon seeing Jesus die, converted to faith in Jesus as the Son of God, like his executor did (15:39) or that he did not make the meeting. Mark tells us that Joseph was "*looking for the kingdom of God and took courage*" to ask Pilate for the body. This tells us that Joseph and a rich theological reason to convert (seeing Jesus as the king of the Kingdom) and personal conscience to follow by mustering courage and go with his conviction against the grain of his peers. *Therefore, we have good reason to accept the tradition in Corinthians while also affirming the empty tomb claim of the Gospels*. The third element is that "[he was raised on the third day](#)." Here is the bold resurrection claim. To this Ehrman says: "[There can be no doubt, historically, that some of Jesus's followers came to believe he was raised from the dead—no doubt whatsoever. This is how Christianity started. If no one has thought Jesus had been raised, he would have been lost in the mists of Jewish antiquity and would be known today only as another failed](#)

Jewish prophet.” Great point. Jesus wouldn’t stand out in history if people didn’t believe Jesus rose from the dead. But notice Ehrman’s wording “Jesus followers came to believe.” He contends that while some believed this; it was based on a vision and not on an actual historical resurrection. Rising on the third day, he says, was just a theological flourish based on Jonah’s three days in the whale or Hosea 6:2. While there are symbolic connections to those texts, this doesn’t mean that the three days or the resurrection isn’t literal. The early Church most likely included this phrase to reflect that there was no great delay of time, but in reporting on history, it was actually a specific number of days, which reflects their encounter with an actual, physically risen Christ. In fact, the verb used in the tradition is perfect tense, which means that he *was raised at a specific point in time, and that his act of being raised has ongoing effects in the present.* It does not suggest that there were multiple visions of Jesus. It says that something happened to Jesus body in history—raised—and that event continues to have remarkable impact. The grammar puts the resurrection in history, where Ehrman is doing his work. Moreover, if Christianity is really based on having visions of the risen Jesus, then why don’t most Christians have that encounter too? Because Christianity is not based on visions but on the historic death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its about a person not a resurrection. This is why Paul goes out of his way to list all the eyewitnesses: Peter, the Twelve, 500+, James, and himself. 100s of people claim to have witnessed an actual, physical, resurrected Jesus with nail-scarred hands. Eyewitness testimony is critical to good history. Reporters prioritize this material when writing their story, so do courts. And there is a deafening silence to these reports in the 1st century. They are uncontested. Only later, when another religion called Gnosticism flowered, did people begin to reread Jesus as a spirit. Which was based on their philosophy of the body being corrupt or evil. Ehrman is simply trying to re-read the text based on his historical presuppositions, which he actually admits: “**I should stress that unbelievers (like me) cannot disprove the resurrection either, on historical grounds.**” In essence he says that the resurrection is a matter of faith not history because history cannot admit miracles as a plausible explanations. But isn’t this biased, ruling out the supernatural from the historical record? He says he isn’t anti-supernatural but as a historian its not admissible evidence. This, of course, is based on 21st century historiography, which he is imposing on 1st century historical documents. It is a classic case of what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery,” arrogantly assuming the superiority of his historical moment over the past saying—miracles don’t count. But they did then!

Response

This brings us to the question: What difference does it make? Well the resurrection doesn’t make any difference if you don’t have faith. But I’m not talking Bart Ehrman faith, and I’m not even about faith *in the historic resurrection.* The gospel is not mainly a set of dogma to which we pin or do not pin our beliefs. Resurrection?—yes or no. That is a mental game.

Rather, the Scriptures are appealing to your conscience, like they did to Joseph, the centurion, and countless others. The gospel is a rich story about the Messiah absorbing your sin. Our guilt rightfully presses down on us. We are condemned before a transcendent holy God. But Jesus would have us reach up in faith, take hold of his hand, allow him to pull us up into his forgiveness. That is not a mere mental decision; it is an act of surrender. It is

compliance with your conscience to trust not in the resurrection but in the unmatched resurrected Christ. God wants faith, not in a doctrine, but in his Son. Otherwise he has to condemn you. His grace for our sin. This is what happened to Paul who was once a murderer of Christians, unworthy, but made worthy by God's grace: "[But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain](#)" (10). I am what I am. That's an identity statement. I am who I am in Christ. Remember that the gospel gives us a new identity. Instead of sinner, you become a saint. He sees you not only as forgiven, but as raised up with Christ into his new and radiant life. Faith not only gets you forgiven; it gets you new creation. The guilt is gone and godliness has come. This changes everything. In creating a new identity in Christ, we are motivated to work hard for the kingdom of God. Earlier he said, you received, stand and are being saved in the gospel. Standing is in the perfect tense, past action with ongoing effect. You don't just believe in the past you keep believing. It's not once saved always saved. That assumes you only believe once. This isn't about pinning your yes or no to a dogma. This is about throwing yourself, your life, on a Person. It's about love. Faith works through love. When you get married you are saying to that spouse, I choose to trust and uniquely love you, like no other. I am ruling all other men and women out. You don't know what's on the other side of the altar. What suffering or hard times may come, but you act in faith out of love and say, I do. That's what happened to Paul and all the early Christians, and to many of us. I do Jesus, and I will continue to trust you, obey you, and love you, exclusively, uniquely above all other gods. I put my faith-love in the risen Christ, not simply nod my head to the resurrection. Well, then, you become part of his new humanity fit for a new world. Your sin his grace, the world's evil for his peace. The story is still unfolding along its central character—Jesus. And the risen Jesus will return to gather his children into his perfect kingdom. He admits those who continue to stand in faith-love toward him. To those who simply nod their heads over doctrines, he dismisses since they believed in vain. Like church, the resurrection isn't something you simply attend; it is something you are, something you become by faith in the risen Christ.