

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

FOUNDATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

LET the issue be quite plain from the start: all that we believe - if we claim to be Christians - is staked upon the truth of Christ's resurrection. Either it is true that the body which hung upon the cross was pierced by the soldier's spear and placed in a tomb, came out of that tomb with the marks of its suffering still upon it, and was seen and touched truly and physically before ascending to heaven - or Christianity is a delusion. There may be protest against this today: some may urge that Jesus was no less a great teacher of mankind if he decayed in the tomb and was lost, and others will contend that there may have been a kind of "spiritual" resurrection of Jesus without the need for a bodily presence among his disciples which, for some reason, is distasteful.

If Jesus did not rise...

As to the first of these protests, if Jesus did not rise from the dead he was deluded; there is no power in his gospel. His moral precepts may be high and noble, but there is no life in if them. The world does not willingly accept noble principles of conduct because a murdered man has advocated them. If the cross was the end of Jesus, it is the end of dead hope too. For he taught moral precepts to men who believed that his gospel was "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), and that salvation cannot be realized to completion unless he is alive. The Christian hope is that a risen Christ will come again to give them his gift of eternal life, and to establish on the earth God's reign.

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The second protest is a mere invention. It is not resurrection at all in the sense in which Jesus understood it, and the early Christians believed. It is as much as to say: 'We do not believe that the resurrection of Jesus, as the Bible records it, ever took place; but we can invent an idea of Jesus' survival, for which there is certainly no evidence, which is the best concession we can make to faith.' We ask for no such concession. The challenge is very simple, and its terms are those on which an honest believer and an honest unbeliever will agree: either Jesus rose, physically and demonstrably, and Christianity is true beyond all argument; or Jesus died, never to live again, and Christianity is a monstrous lie.

"If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

The Historic Facts

According to the records in the four Gospels, the events beginning with the death of Jesus were these: on the afternoon of his crucifixion, his death was observed by certain women of his disciples (Luke 23:55). After he had died, two secret disciples of his, named Nicodemus and Joseph, obtained permission from Pilate (the Roman

Governor) to bury his body, and then took it down, wrapped it with spices in a burying cloth, and placed it in Joseph's own tomb in a garden near the place of crucifixion (John 19:38-42). In this they were observed by some of the women, and evidently the ceremony of burial had not been finished - no doubt because the coming of the Jewish Sabbath Day interrupted it - for the women went away with the full intention of coming back to complete it. But the Jewish rulers who had been responsible for Jesus' death were uneasy, and succeeded in sealing the tomb and setting a guard to prevent interference (Matthew 27:62-66).

Yet something occurred which defeated all precautions. An angel from heaven opened the grave and sent the guards dazed and disgraced to report to their employers the disappearance of the body (Matthew 28:2-4). The women, coming at dawn on the first day of the week to continue the burial operations, were disappointed in their expectation of a helper to remove the stone, but were suddenly relieved of their anxieties by seeing the grave open. The grave was found to be empty, and while Mary Magdalene ran to tell the disciples that the body had disappeared, the other women encountered an angel at the tomb and were told to go with the message that Jesus had risen from the dead (Mark 16:3-7). Two disciples, Peter and John, came to the grave and inspected it, and when they had gone, the disconsolate Mary Magdalene had the first vision of the risen Christ (John 20:1-18).

She went with this evidence to convince the others. The other women, themselves fortified with a vision of Jesus, went also, but the disciples thought them hysterical, and were not persuaded (Luke 24:10,11). Two of them, however, musing over the events of the weekend as they walked a few miles to a neighbouring village, were joined by a stranger, who consented to share a meal with them, and in the midst of that meal was recognized by them as Jesus. They hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others, still without effect until once again Jesus was with them, and all the disciples except the absent Thomas believed (24:13-35). A later appearance convinced him also (John 20:24-29), and was followed (so the Acts of the Apostles tells us, Acts 1:1- 4) by various appearances throughout nearly six weeks, after which Jesus was taken from their sight into heaven.

The Winning of Belief

Notice the painful process whereby their belief was won. The disciples did not expect that Jesus would die, in spite of plain warnings from him (Matthew 16:21). They believed that their leader was destined to be the King of the Jews, literally and at once; and as soon as he allowed himself to be taken their hopes were dashed. The men (with two exceptions) fled from him, and the women remained, bravely but forlorn, only to take care of his corpse. They were simply unprepared for the resurrection, and nothing short of the strongest proof would convince any of them. Mary thought when the body was not in the grave that it had been stolen; the two who walked from Jerusalem were unbelieving in spite of their astonishment at the women's stories - they could not persuade the remainder by their experience (Mark 16:13); the absent Thomas stood out when all the rest had been convinced, until he, too, saw Jesus. Notice also the nature of the appeal which Jesus made to his disciples when he had risen. See how actual it was: the women held him by the feet (Matthew 28:9); he shared meals with the two, with the many in the upper room, and with the disciples by the lake-side (Luke 24:30,41; John 21:9-13); he invited Thomas to prove by the nail-marks and the spear-wound that he was the Jesus who had died (John 20:27). But there is another appeal too. The disciples were "fools and slow of heart" (Luke 24:25) not to have believed before: they ought to have taken more notice of

the evidence they had. For the Jews had a Bible (our Old Testament) which they revered as the trustworthy Word of God, and, said Jesus, that Book contained evidence that their Christ must suffer first, and receive glory afterwards:

"And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

The Witness of the Apostles

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This is important, because when we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, we find that the Apostles set about their preaching in the same way in which they had been taught. Jesus had appeared to them, showing himself alive by "many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3) and they were witnesses of his resurrection to the world. The word "witness" becomes a persistent one in the record of their preaching. When they appointed another apostle, they were

scrupulous that he must have the proper qualifications to be able to add his testimony to theirs (verses 21,22) and wherever they went, they appealed always to this witness-office of theirs:

"God showed him openly; not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:40,41).

But in another respect, too, they followed the example of Jesus. If they could be persuaded from the Word of God, so could their fellow-countrymen who held the Word in the same esteem. And so Peter appealed to a Psalm of David to show that Jesus could not remain in the grave (Acts 2:25); and summed up the evidence of the Old Testament in words wonderfully like those which Jesus had spoken to him (3:22-24). Philip could convert a man who was reading a prophecy about the suffering Christ by

"...beginning at the same Scripture and preaching Jesus" (8:30-35).

Paul's Testimony

There is one great "witness" who stands out from all the rest. A certain Jew named Saul had been a violent persecutor of the Christian faith, but according to the records of the Acts, became miraculously persuaded of the truth of what he had opposed, and set about preaching it. When that happened, he used both of the methods the other apostles employed. He was a "witness" specially appointed by Christ; and he appealed to the Bible to support what he said.

"For they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor yet the voices of their prophets which are read every sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning him." (Acts 13:27)

That this passage does not formally mention the resurrection matters not at all. Paul preaches the Christ in whom both Christian and Jew put their hope, and if the Scripture foretold that Christ must suffer, it followed without dispute that Christ must also have risen to perform his work of kingship. The question was only: "Is Jesus,

whom Paul preaches, really Christ? If so, he must have risen." We shall come back to this passage.

"... he rose again the third day"

Both classes of evidence can be summed up in another passage of Paul's: it is his own summary of the assurance of the resurrection. The Scriptures are given first; and then the "witnesses":

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the Apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

What have we Learned?

Obviously, nothing of what has gone before will be accepted by those who do not believe the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise he could not have appeared to the women, or Peter, or the Twelve, or Paul. What the Scriptures may have said does not matter to many people today, because the Bible is often no longer the authority it was to the Jews. Whatever witnesses there may or may not have been, they are all of them dead long ago, and they cannot testify before us now. However persuasive the reasonings of the first Christians may have been to those who were able to see them, and accept the force of their Scripture, we can no longer hear those reasonings, and many no longer believe those Scriptures.

Yet there are aspects of the subject that even unbelievers will accept:

- a) That Jesus lived, preached, incurred the enmity of his countrymen, and died a criminal's death.
- b) That his disciples did not expect his death, and were disillusioned and demoralized when it happened.
- c) That, notwithstanding this, the same men very quickly afterwards were proclaiming, first in Judea and then through the world, that Jesus had risen from the dead, and had been unmistakably seen by themselves.
- d) That a confirmed enemy of the early Christians, known to the Jews by the name of Saul and to the Gentiles as Paul, suddenly became the foremost advocate of the faith, and somewhere between fifteen and thirty- five years after the death of Jesus wrote several letters in which the resurrection is a central doctrine.
- e) That the early Christian preachers appealed to the Scriptures as supporting their claims. To these must be added two other facts not so far specifically raised, but completing the evidence we need:
- f) That the Gospel was preached to Gentiles very quickly after its first announcement. It was preached by Jews—Jews of Palestine who were notoriously hostile to fellowship with Gentiles.

g) That, at the time when Jesus appeared, the Jews were keyed up in expectation of their Christ; that there was much heart-searching when he appeared, whether he was the one for whom they looked (John 10:24); that they decided against him, and put him to death as an imposter and a blasphemer (Mark 14:62- 64).

With these undisputed facts the resurrection of Jesus can be placed beyond any doubt. In spite of unbelief in the Scriptures; in spite of the death of the so-called witnesses, the main evidence takes the same form as it does in the New Testament.

The Evidence of the Scriptures

The last fact in our list provides the key. When Jesus came, the Jews were expecting Christ. Why were they expecting him - then? That people who believed in their Old Testament should expect their king sometime is obvious enough. Countless times he is promised, and they were particularly alive to those Old Testament passages which spoke of "a king" who shall reign in righteousness (Isaiah 32:1); of "a prophet like unto Moses" (Deuteronomy 18:18); of a Christ who "endureth for ever" (Psalm 72:17). But this does not answer the question: Why were they expecting him then? There can be only one answer. Those who knew the Scripture which said that Christ should come out of Bethlehem (and held that against Jesus because he lived in Nazareth) (Micah 5:2; John 7:42), knew also the Scripture which set a time for the appearing of "Messiah the Prince" (Daniel 9:25). The Prophet Daniel, writing in the time of Cyrus the Great, about 539 BC, records this message:

"Seventy weeks (i.e. 'weeks' of years) are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and sixty two weeks and after sixty two weeks shall Messiah be cut off and he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week." (Daniel 9:24-27)

The Coming of Messiah

We have a starting point (the commandment to restore Jerusalem), from which to date the prophecy; and a period of 483 years which is to elapse before Messiah comes. Two commandments, of the Persian king Artaxerxes Longimanus (see Ezra 7:7,11; Nehemiah 2:1,8), were made in 457 and 444 BC, and both have been regarded as fulfilling the terms of this prophecy. For our purpose it is immaterial: the 483 years runs out at about AD 30 in either case, and it was then that the Jews expected Christ. It was then that Jesus came! After three and a half years' trial they decided that he was not their Christ, and crucified him. Now note two small points: the expression "cut off" in the prophecy, and the words of Paul already quoted:

"Because they knew him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning him." (Acts 13:27)

"Cut off" means killed - killed judicially (Genesis 17:14)—a preposterous thing to say of the promised King of the Jews, as Pilate himself reminded those who were clamouring for Jesus' death (John 19:15). But cut him off they did - because they knew him not. Had they known that they were the agents whereby an awful prophecy of the suffering of their King should be fulfilled—they could not have dared to accomplish it. Only by their combination of rejection and blindness could that

prophecy have been fulfilled in Jesus. If they had accepted him as their Messiah it would have failed.

The Work of Messiah

The prophecy can be taken vastly further than this. The work which Messiah was to do, according to Daniel, was the work which Jesus said he had come to do—to make an end of sins, to bring in everlasting righteousness. It is the work of salvation by his death. The Scriptures and the authenticity of the Messiahship of Jesus were vindicated in a single stroke. Daniel was right about the death: clearly he must be right also about the survival and the confirming of the covenant. And then the whole course of Old Testament prediction of a king:

- a) who goes to the grave but does not remain to become corrupt (Psalm 16:10);
- b) a Servant who is wounded and offered for sin, but prolongs his days and receives the pleasure of the Lord (Isaiah 53:1-12);
- c) a Ruler who comes to his expectant people and causes them to weep when they see his wounds (Zechariah 12:10)

all these predictions fall into line and establish that the Scripture is from God; that the Messiah is Jesus who suffered against all probability as it foretold; and that the resurrection which it said would follow must have done so.

The Preaching to the Gentiles

But the evidence from Scripture is stronger than this. To develop it now we need the fact that Jews were found so soon preaching the Gospel to Gentiles. When the infant Jesus was taken into the Temple, the aged man who took him in his arms called him

"a light to lighten the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32).

In the course of the recorded preaching of Jesus, he many times hinted that his message would be extended to those people whom his nation despised:

"Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring." (John 10:16)

"Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 8:11)

He warned his own generation with the sign of their prophet Jonah, who had in symbol risen from death in the belly of the whale, and emerged to preach salvation to Gentiles; and he pointed to that as a sign of his own resurrection (Luke 11:29-32). Now this was to Jews incredible, and when they suspected Jesus of such designs they mocked him for it:

"Will he go unto the dispersed ... and teach the Gentiles'?" (John 7:35).

The evidence of what happened after the resurrection is sufficiently clear to show that his disciples themselves understood it as little as his enemies. Yet the prophets had foretold it long before:

"It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to

the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth"
(Isaiah 49:6).

Yet neither the Jews his enemies nor the Jews his disciples expected it, until Peter was sent to preach to a Roman (Acts 10), and Paul became the minister of the Gospel to the wide world. It was written, though; and Jesus had foretold it himself. After his resurrection it came to pass, to the astonishment of all. There is one conclusion, and one alone. Jesus had risen, and given the commandment the Gospels say he did:

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19, RV).

Evidence of Eye-Witnesses

One point is absolutely beyond question: on Sunday morning after the death of Jesus, the tomb in which he had lain was empty. Not only did his friends observe it, but his enemies did not deny it. Matthew says that they were so convinced of the fact of it that they put in circulation the story that the disciples had stolen the body,

"and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day" (Matthew 28:15).

It was still the Jewish story a hundred years later and beyond, in the days of

Justin Martyr and Tertullian (Justin, Dialogue with Trypho, 108; Tertullian, On Spectacles, 30). When the disciples began their preaching, they did not appeal to the empty tomb and the vision of the women to prove their point, and their enemies did not deny it. No fantastic theory, such as that the women in the half-light approached the wrong tomb, from which a young man vainly tried to direct their attention to the right one, will bear a moment's examination, for it would have been the simplest matter in the world for the hostile authorities to have directed attention to the right one, and disproved the disciples' story for ever.

The tomb was empty, and the body of Jesus had left it. What are the possible explanations? In the early days, when they knew that Jesus had really died, the rulers said that his disciples had stolen the body from the grave. But the Jews set a guard to protect against this eventuality. Even if the presence of the guard is discounted, read the Gospels to see what kind of men the disciples were. Read the accounts of their behaviour when their Master was taken to trial; of their sorrow and unbelief afterwards. And then ask, first, whether they were likely ever to attempt the theft. Second, ask what they would have done it for. And third, ask what use they made of their crime. We shall return to that.

An Incredible Hypothesis

In much later days, there has arisen a more foolish theory. This suggests that the soldiers who omitted to break the Master's legs, on the ground that he appeared to be dead (John 19:33), committed the worst mistake of their lives; that the friends

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who buried him did not notice that he had merely swooned but performed their burial rites anyway; that in the cool of the grave he revived and made his way out of it into his disciples' presence, bloody and half-dead - and that this human spectre succeeded in convincing them that it was immortal. Imagine their feelings when so confronted, picture them joyfully patching up falsehoods of glorious appearances as he dragged himself off to die; and ask again what use they made of it.

The disciples who said that Jesus had risen from the dead did it (timid, fleeing and disappointed men as they had been) in the teeth of their enemies, smiling at their persecutions. Humanly speaking, the Apostles plunged into needless peril without prospect of gain, smiled at their sufferings, and embraced violent death, for nothing at all unless their claim was true.

We know this is what they did. The most destructive opponent of the Gospel does not deny that the events recorded in the Acts took place substantially as they are written, with a band of humble men progressing so much in their faith that their enemies spoke in alarm of their "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). He does not question that the Roman world really was overrun with Christianity through their exertions. And we have three choices: they did it

- i) because they had stolen the body and let it corrupt somewhere else, and elaborated a vast framework of deceit from Scripture and invented appearances;
- ii) because a barely alive Jesus had struggled inexplicably from the tomb and gasped an agonized greeting in their terrified ears;
- iii) because Jesus rose from the dead.

The Adversary Turned Apostle

It is accepted that Paul had been a persecutor; that he became the most diligent of preachers; that he wrote records of his work and faith, of which the First Letter to the Corinthians is unquestionably one. Why did he change? Stolen bodies and inexplicable swoons will not help us now; the crucifixion was perhaps three years past when Paul changed his mind. Repeatedly we learn that it was because he had seen Jesus, "as of one born out of due time". There is no other explanation. He had been a fanatical oppressor of the Faith: he became a tireless and enthusiastic champion of it. What he suffered for his conviction, he tells us (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). What he gained by it only a believer can know, but we know he found the exchange eminently worthwhile. We have already referred to the boldness of his conviction, and the point only needs restatement for its force to appear:

There is Paul's challenge: there are nearly five hundred men alive at this moment, waiting to be asked and to confirm what I say!

"He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present".

There is his challenge: there are nearly five hundred men alive at this moment, waiting to be asked and to confirm what I say! Such is his confidence - his reasonable confidence - in his faith.

The Meaning of the Fact

Jesus rose from the dead. There is the fact. Some facts can be announced with indifference, the world being just the same whether they are true or false; the truth of others has a sequel. This is such a one. To see what follows from it, read this selection of passages and ask: "What is this to me? What does it offer me? What does it require?"

"All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19)

"God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." (Acts 2:36,38)

"God commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." (Acts 17:30,31)

"He was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. The gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." (Romans 1:4,16)

"Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death." (Revelation 1:18)

There is the situation. Jesus rose from the dead. He is therefore the Son of God. He had therefore authority to call upon men to repent of their bondage to sin, and turn to him for salvation. He is therefore destined to come and judge and rule the world in righteousness. He will therefore return to raise the dead, and give eternal life to those who have trusted in him.

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Our Assurance

The work which was begun for men's salvation in his life and death has now a total assurance of being completed:

"God hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead."

No belief in him can fail, and the call to those who already believe, or are beginning to believe, is the call with which Paul ends his triumphant treatment of our subject:

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:58)

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