



THE BEREHA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Presenting a Case for Belief in Jesus: An Overview (3)

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The last, and most important, topic in presenting the case for belief in Jesus (see parts [one](#) and [two](#)) is the claim that he was raised from the dead. We’ll begin our overview with the first person account written by Paul a mere two decades after Jesus’s crucifixion. He used the plural adjective *πρώτοις* (*prōtois*) and fourfold repetition of the conjunction *ὅτι* (*hoti*) to emphasize the four first-importance components of the gospel he had preached to the Corinthians: “*that Christ died ... that he was buried ... that he was raised ... and that he appeared to*” a variety of witnesses (1 Cor 15.3–8). Because of the letter’s early date and Paul’s reference to the witnesses (vv. 9–11 cf. Gal 1.18–19), even many skeptical critics accept his testimony as primary source documentation for early Christian resurrection belief (Habermas 2006, 127–133).

One of the witnesses was Cephas (1 Cor 15.5), also known as Peter, whose Pentecost sermon reported by Luke in Acts 2 accentuates the resurrection to prove his thesis that “God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36). From Acts 2.22, where he transitions from explaining the Pentecost events in light of Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2.17–21; cf. Joel 2.28–32) to begin his case for Jesus, through verse 36’s statement of the thesis, Luke’s report of Peter’s sermon encompasses fifteen verses, 284 words in the UBS5 Greek text. Twelve verses (vv. 24–35), 216 words, are used to affirm and present evidence for the claim that God raised him.

Peter’s sermon includes the same four themes of the gospel Paul enumerated. He declared that Christ died (Acts 2.23), was buried (v. 29), was raised (vv. 24, 31–35), and was then seen by multiple witnesses (v. 32). The sermon also serves as a template for the preaching presented throughout Acts. A study of the book’s sermons and defense speeches in light of Paul’s four components in 1 Corinthians 15 reveals that the *death* of Jesus is directly mentioned or implied by the preacher, or referred to by one of his hearers, in nine of them (Acts 2.23; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.39; 13.28; 17.3; 25.19; 26.23); his *burial* is mentioned in two (2.27–31; 13.29; both to Jewish audiences); and the post-resurrection *witnesses* are mentioned or implied in six (2.32; 3.15; 5.32; 10.41–42; 13.31; 22.8, 10 [cf. v. 15]). Significantly, the *resurrection* itself is mentioned in all thirteen (two presentations in Acts 17) (2.24ff.; 3.15; 4.10; 5.30; 10.40; 13.30, 32–37; 17.3, 18, 31; 22.6–10; 23.6; 24.21; 25.19; 26.8, 23). (Note that Luke’s report of Paul’s Pisidian Antioch sermon in Acts 13.16–43 includes all four: death [v. 28], burial [v. 29], resurrection [vv. 30, 32–37], and witnesses [v. 31].)

Peter’s sermon also highlights the primary categories of evidence that were used to defend the truth of the resurrection. In line with the expectations of prophecy (Acts 2.25–28, 34–35), he

declared that, unlike David, Jesus, who had been “killed” by crucifixion (v. 23), was no longer in his tomb and had been seen after his death by multiple witnesses (vv. 29–32; cf. Luke 24.1–35 and par.). God had thus exalted him and given him the promised Holy Spirit which he had poured out on Pentecost (v. 33). Note that while both an empty tomb and witness testimony are *necessary* to prove the case, neither is *sufficient* to prove it on its own. Graves have been found empty for other reasons (cf. Matt 28.11–15) and the testimony of thousands cannot prove a person was raised if that person’s body can be produced. Fleshing out the details of both premises is necessary in presenting the case—giving scrutiny to the veracity of the witnesses, for example—but the empty tomb and witnesses constitute its basic premises.

Important as the evidence for the reality of the resurrection was for the early preachers, their interest in the subject entailed more than an apologetic for its actual occurrence. Paul’s inclusion of the resurrection in the summary of the gospel that forms his greeting to the Roman letter succinctly summarizes its place in Christian faith as the theological crux on which everything stands or falls.

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and *was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord*, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ (Rom 1.1–6 NRSV).

Elsewhere in Romans, Paul emphasized integral connections between the resurrection and justification (4.25), ongoing newness of life (6.1–11), Spirit-led life (8.9–11), and confidence in the face of trials and suffering (8.31–39). In other passages, he and others expanded on these and related themes, emphasizing that Jesus’s victory over sin and death shows he can lead all others to the same victory (1 Cor 15.51–58; cf. Heb 2.14–15). In Paul’s understanding, if Christ was not raised, the church wastes its time in preaching a message and faith that are “useless” (κενός, *kenos*) (v. 14 NIV). Using μάταιος (*mataios*), a form of which the LXX used to translate “vanity” (הֶבֶל, *hebel*) in Ecclesiastes, Paul said that, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is *futile* and you are still in your sins” (v. 17). And if that is true, we are completely hopeless for, “if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (v. 19).

Works Cited

Gary R. Habermas. 2006 [2001]. “Why I Believe the Miracles of Jesus Actually Happened.” *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe*. ed. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman. rev. & exp., 120–134. Baker Books.

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The topical sermon (page link [here](#)), “Rock Solid Faith: Sustained by the First-Important Things” (sermon link [here](#)).

Summary: “At a time when push-back against the faith seems to be increasing, returning to 1 Corinthians 15 and the first-important things will help us to [a] be reminded and/or [b] review these things to reassure others. First-important things therefore help sustain our faith.”

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