

The Greatest Miracle: Jesus' Resurrection

From one standpoint, one miracle is as difficult as another and one is as easy as another. Supernatural power is required for each one. However, from another standpoint, every other miracle recorded in the Bible is of less consequence than the resurrection of Jesus' body, death having no more dominion over Him. If the miracle of Jesus' being raised can be substantiated, certainly all other biblical miracles are credible. So important and far-reaching, therefore, are the consequences of Jesus' resurrection, that evidence for all Bible miracles may be said to stand or fall with the proof or disproof of the Resurrection. Hence, a special study of what happened on the third day after Jesus' burial is a simple and direct way to prove or disprove Bible miracles in general.

IF HE WAS NOT RAISED

A survey shows six possible explanations as to what happened to Jesus' body if He was not raised.

(1) *Body Stolen by Jesus' Disciples.* That Jesus' body

was stolen by His disciples was the earliest theory of unbelievers. This was the theory which the chief priests of the Jews put into the mouths of the soldiers who had guarded the tomb. (See Matthew 28:1–15.) The theory assumes that each of the soldiers went to sleep on duty, but that they could testify what happened while they were asleep. Further, it means that the pilfering disciples took time to remove Jesus' linen burial shroud, laying it in one place, and to remove His head cloth, rolling it and laying it in a place by itself in the vacated tomb. This theory makes Jesus' disciples, men who went about urging people to be truthful, deceivers.

(2) *The Swoon Theory*. A second theory says that Jesus never really died, but only fainted. Then, reviving, He told people He had been raised from the dead. Such a theory assumes that Jesus stayed alive after a six-hour ordeal in an upright position on the cross, after a soldier's spear thrust, and after three days in a sealed tomb. This theory claims that the wounded, bleeding Jesus, without nourishment, revived after three days from His faint, removed His burial shroud and headband, moved a "very great" (Mark 16:4) stone, eluded guards, and walked fifteen miles to Emmaus and back again.

Actually, Pilate had not released the body until the centurion could certify Jesus' death. Further, the Jews believed that Jesus was really dead.

(3) *Body Stolen by Jesus' Enemies*. A third theory asserts that Jesus' body was stolen by His enemies. If this were true, Christianity would surely not have lasted long. The new religion would have received a mortal blow if Jesus' enemies had merely presented His corpse as proof that Jesus remained dead.

(4) *Hallucination*. A fourth theory, accepted by most unbelievers, is that Jesus' disciples experienced a hallucination—that they so much wanted to see Jesus again that they thought they did. On the contrary, His disciples did *not* expect to see Him again. Even they did not believe the resurrection story when they first heard it. Actually, they were the first skeptics, but they were honest in their skepticism. A person in a doubting mood is no subject to become a victim of hallucination. Moreover, if the disciples were victims of such an imagination, several facts are unexplained. The hallucination theory does not include a reason for the empty tomb. It does not explain the eating of bread and fish by the lakeside or why five hundred people would have the same illusion. Further, it does not consider how three thousand people could have been made believers in less than two months or why, though Jesus' appearances ceased, belief in His resurrection became permanent.

(5) *Mental Resurrection*. A fifth theory holds that Jesus' body stayed dead, but since His disciples kept Jesus in mind and lived according to His teachings, to them Jesus was still living. In this way they could speak of Jesus' being raised to live on in the hearts of men. In other words, according to this theory, the resurrection was purely mental. However, this theory fails to explain the empty tomb. Also, it fails to explain the sudden change of the disconsolate disciples into confident martyrs for Christ, testifying that they had handled the risen Jesus.

(6) *An Objective Vision of a Spirit*. A variation of the mental resurrection theory is that the disciples actually saw the glorified spirit of Jesus, though His body did not rise. This theory has been conceived because

of the urgent need to explain why the unbelieving disciples suddenly changed into certain believers of the Resurrection.

However, the weakness of the theory is that it merely substitutes one miracle for another: While it is difficult to believe in a bodily resurrection, it is just as difficult to believe in a spirit's being visible. Furthermore, this theory does not explain how the tomb became empty. Moreover, Jesus permitted His body to be handled, and He ate food with His disciples to prove that He was not a mere spirit.

EVIDENCES FOR JESUS' BODILY RESURRECTION

At least eight lines of evidence lead to the conclusion that Jesus' body was raised from death after three days: (1) the open tomb, (2) the vacated tomb, (3) the shroud, (4) the folded headband, (5) eyewitnesses, (6) credibility of the New Testament, (7) existence of Christianity, and (8) memorials.

(1) *The Open Tomb.* With a great stone rolled against the sepulchre, and with a seal on the sepulchre, how the tomb was opened is a question that must be considered. The Romans certainly did not open the tomb, for they were stationed there to see that it was not opened. The Jews certainly did not open the tomb, for they were the ones who had requested that the sepulchre be made sure against any intruders. The disciples certainly did not open the tomb, for they could not have overcome the guard, nor were they of that disposition. Somehow, though, the tomb was opened. If the stone was not rolled away by an angel, as the Gospel of Matthew relates, then who opened the sepulchre remains an unanswered question.

(2) *The Vacated Tomb*. Not only must the problem of moving the great stone be considered, but how the tomb came to be empty is another important matter. One cannot imagine a reason why the Roman guard would have wanted to remove the corpse. The Jews wanted to be sure that the body stayed in the tomb. It was Jesus' disciples who put the body in the sepulchre; that was where they wanted it—and even if they had wanted the body removed, they could not have eluded the guard. If Jesus did not rise of His own divine power and walk out of the sepulchre, how the tomb came to be empty remains an unanswered question.

(3) *The Shroud*. A fine linen grave shroud, a *sindon* (quality Indian cloth) bought by a rich man, was left in the tomb. If grave robbers took the body, they would have wanted the expensive linen. If, by stealth, the disciples managed to bypass the guards, roll away the great stone, and steal the body, one cannot imagine why they took the time to remove the shroud from Jesus' body. If Jesus Himself did not remove the burial garment, then why it was left in the tomb remains a mystery.

(4) *The Folded Headband*. Not lying with the shroud, but rolled up and in a place to itself in the vacated tomb, was a headband. It was not hastily thrown, but was folded together. Whoever removed the head-handkerchief was in no hurry, and he was orderly. Grave robbers, whether disciples or not, would not have taken time to remove a headband; even if they had, they would have been hasty and careless. If Jesus Himself did not deliberately remove and fold the headband, and place it by itself, then why it was left separate and rolled remains unknown.

(5) *Eyewitnesses*. The apostles testified that after Jesus' resurrection they both ate and drank with Him, that they saw Him with their own eyes, that they heard Him speak, and that they handled Him. Either they were deceived by the world's best person, or they conspired to make up a tale. If they handled Him and could see His wounded hands and side, if they heard Him speak, they could not have been deceived. From another viewpoint, if they deliberately concocted a falsehood, their only reward was hurting consciences. They suffered physical want and rough treatment because of their belief. They became homeless; they were reviled, persecuted, and slandered. Truly, by becoming the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, they were fools for Christ's sake (1 Corinthians 4:10–13). While they urged truth-speaking, some theories would have us to believe they themselves were liars. Since the apostles were neither deceived nor dishonest in their testimony, the only alternative is that they told the truth. The testimony of the apostles as eyewitnesses is weighty evidence for a bodily resurrection.

(6) *Credibility of the New Testament*. The written documents composing the New Testament testify to the bodily resurrection of Christ. These books, accepted as the most reliable books of history, cannot be lightly considered. These in themselves constitute weighty evidence, which, if the bodily resurrection were a fiction, would be unexplainable. Why twenty-seven well attested and credence-carrying volumes should have been aligned with the world's greatest swindle does not make good sense. If the Resurrection were a farce, how these twenty-seven books came to command such confidence would be

an unanswered question.

(7) *Existence of Christianity*. If the resurrection of Jesus was actual, then the birth and growth of Christianity are easily explained. If its leader remained a corpse, however, it is strange that millions of people accepted a religion—the only one of its kind—based on the resurrection of Jesus' body from the tomb. Without that resurrection, Christianity would have died in its birth.

(8) *Memorials*. If the resurrection of Jesus was actual, then the significance of the Lord's Supper and of the Lord's Day makes good sense. If there was no bodily resurrection, then these memorials do not make sense.

If there was a bodily resurrection, then a simple answer explains each of the evidences listed here. No other explanation agrees with all the facts. Other explanations introduce more problems than they solve, leaving questions, uncertainty, and confusion. These eight evidences must be dealt with in order for one to reach a conclusion on the subject of Jesus' resurrection.

CONCLUSION

We have seen six explanations as to what happened to Jesus' body if He was not resurrected. Examination shows that they are lacking in demonstration and fail to satisfy. Only the conclusion that Jesus actually rose from death agrees with all the evidence and gives hope.