

Jesus: Alive in Heaven

The eleven apostles were personally upbraided by the risen Christ because of their “unbelief and hardness of heart” (Mark 16:14), but they made a sudden change. They became so strongly convinced that they had seen Jesus’ corpse walking and talking—very much alive—that they became martyrs for their new faith.

There is also the “one untimely born” (1 Corinthians 15:8), who at the first was a violent persecutor of anyone wearing the name of Christ, breathing out threats and murder (Acts 8:1; 9:1, 2; 22:4, 5; 26:9–11). Paul did not see Jesus during His forty days on the earth after the Resurrection, but his story is as unbelievable as the report that a corpse had come to life. He claimed that he saw Jesus in a blinding light in the sky and heard Him speak (Acts 9:3–6; 22:6–11; 26:13–18).

If Paul actually did see Jesus and hear Him talking, then Jesus was not dead: He had risen from the tomb and had gone to heaven. If the alleged heavenly vi-

sion can be substantiated, then strong evidence from an unbeliever supports the resurrection of Jesus. A heavenly vision seems nearly as bizarre and preposterous as the report of a corpse living again. Is there any validation of Paul's claim?

HALLUCINATION?

Was Paul a victim of hallucination? That sounds plausible until one remembers what a resolute, strong-minded person Paul was. Psychologists say that hallucinations are usually induced by suggestion. In this case, however, any suggestion in Paul's mind would have been exactly the opposite of seeing Jesus. He hated the very name of Jesus, believed Him to be an imposter, and was on a journey to find more of Jesus' followers in order to bind, jail, and kill them. No, psychologically Paul was oriented never to see Jesus. The idea of a make-believe experience in Paul's case does not make sense.

MENTAL DERANGEMENT?

If mental delusion or power of suggestion does not explain Paul's Damascus road experience, had his learning ruined his mind? This was Festus' diagnosis (Acts 26:24). For a man with an unbalanced mind to be able to write thirteen or fourteen of the world's greatest books does not speak well for balanced minds! It would be an unheard-of mental malady which allowed a man to motivate more people to right living than anyone other than Jesus Himself. If Festus was right, we need more insanity! Whatever is the right explanation for an alleged daylight vision on a public highway, an erratic mind does not seem to be a valid option in Paul's case.

A CHRISTIAN DECEPTION?

If neither hallucination nor insanity is a reasonable explanation for what Paul saw, what is reasonable? Was Paul simply deceived by Christians? Even such a suggestion is a slander against Christians, for they were not in the deceiving business. Their goal was to follow Him who claimed to be the personification of truth (John 14:6).

Furthermore, stubborn Paul would not have listened to a Christian if one had tried to mislead him. He had held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, and he had given testimony to cause others to die. Besides, there were no Christians in Paul's company when the alleged strange event occurred.

A DELIBERATE FALSEHOOD?

Is it conceivable that Paul just made up the tale of a heavenly vision? One immediately backs away from such a theory when he considers what Paul lost by lying: (1) His prospects vanished. Before becoming a Christian, he had been on the path to becoming an eminent rabbi in Israel, comparable to his renowned professor Gamaliel. By becoming a Christian, he forfeited this opportunity. (2) Fellowship with his family and kinsmen in Israel, whom he deeply loved, was severed (Romans 9:1–3; see 10:1, 2). (3) His pleasant life was gone, for the persecutor became the persecuted, until finally he was martyred.¹ No, a falsehood about the Damascus road event is unsatisfactory as an explanation.

¹Read Acts 9:23, 29; 14:19; 16:23; 21:13, 30; 23:13; 2 Timothy 4:7, 8.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST?

Men have searched for other alternatives than the four listed above, but they find that the only other alternative is that Paul told the exact truth about what happened. Sir George Lyttelton (1709–73) at first thought that Paul's testimony was a ridiculous tale. He wrote,

[The apostle Paul] either was an imposter, who said what he knew to be false with an intent to deceive; or he was an enthusiast who by the force of an overheated imagination, imposed on himself; or he was deceived by the fraud of others, and all that he said must be imputed to the power of deceit; or what he declared to have been the cause of his conversion, and to have happened in consequence of it, did all really happen; and therefore the Christian religion is a Divine Revelation.²

After examining Paul's life and words in every possible way and exhausting every explanation, Lyttelton concluded that what Paul had related was the truth.

CONCLUSION

Miraculous knowledge was necessary for the Old Testament prophets to know so many specific details about the impending visit of the Messiah to the earth. Their predictions had been put in writing hundreds of years before His arrival.

A person claiming to be the Messiah actually was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Augustus Caesar (31 B.C.–A.D. 14) and was certified by Governor Pontius Pilate to have died during his procuratorship.

²Lord Lyttelton *on the Conversion of St. Paul* and Gilbert West *on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: American Tract Society, 1929), 468.

Besides His reported miracles as credentials for His claim, His manner of life testified to His truthfulness. He was clothed with humility, was selfless in living for others, and seized no personal ambition save doing His Father's will. No man ever spoke as Jesus did, and no man had or ever has lived as He did. His character, as far as human beings can recognize Deity, appears to have been just what would be expected of God.

A conviction gripped certain unbelievers that the crucified Jesus had come back to life, death having no power over Him. This conviction came to them suddenly and was so intense and meaningful to them that they became preachers of that glorious conviction. What they preached, they called the gospel—the "good news." They persuaded thousands of people to accept their belief that God had come and had lived in the flesh among men.