

# The Resurrection of Christ: An Apologetic Primer

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The resurrection of Christ is at the heart of the gospel message (1 Cor. 15:1-7).

- As the apostle Paul reasons, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17, ESV).
- But, is our belief in the resurrection irrational, lacking any rational basis whatsoever?

*There are arguments or claims to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence, or in some way rationally unacceptable, not up to snuff from an intellectual point of view.*

Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000)

**Main point:** Although our belief in Christ's resurrection rests ultimately in God's authoritative word, the available historical evidence demonstrates that belief in Christ's resurrection is entirely rational. Not only does the evidence demonstrate that belief in Christ's resurrection has a rational basis (classes 1-3), but also that there are rational arguments against the alternative theories skeptics have proposed to account for the Christian belief in the resurrection (classes 4-5).

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## **A Rational Defense of Christ's Resurrection: Religious & Historical Context**

*Jesus' resurrection was no bizarre contingency that defied human logic. It was not an utterly incoherent incursion into history. However unique and unparalleled as a historical event, the resurrection of Jesus Christ took place in a coherent framework of meaning. Its context stretched back far beyond the events of Passion Week.*

Carl Henry, *New Strides of Faith* (1972)

1. **God Promised a Resurrection in the Old Testament:**
  - a. If Adam's fall brought death (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:19); **God's redemption would likely include dealing with the problem of death** (Gen. 3:15; 12:3).
  - b. **Hints of a resurrection:**
    - i. “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” (Gen. 5:24)

- ii. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22; Heb. 11:17-19)
  - iii. "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3; Mk 12:26-27)
  - iv. The medium of En-dor brought up the spirit of Samuel for Saul (1 Sam 28)
  - v. "And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11b)
  - vi. The Suffering Servant "was pierced for our transgressions," but "shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted" (Is 52:13-53:12; Acts 8:30-35; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:22-25)
- c. **God revealed himself as an all-powerful God, with power even to raise the dead:**
- i. Song of Moses (Deut 32:39)
  - ii. Hannah's Prayer (1 Sam 2:6)
  - iii. Elijah raises the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:17-24)
  - iv. Elisha raises the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4:18-37)
  - v. Dead man raised to life upon touching Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20-21)
- d. **In poetic and wisdom literature, expectation of divine justice created the hope that God would vindicate those who trust in him, while the wicked would be consumed in the grave:**
- i. Job 19:25-27; Ps 16:10-11; Ps 49:14-15; Ps 73:18-19, 23-26; Prov 11:7a; Prov 12:28; Prov 14:32; Prov 15:24
- e. **God used resurrection imagery to promise a coming age when he would revive his people after the exile, give them his Spirit, and fulfill his promises to them under the reign of a Davidic king (i.e., the Kingdom of God):**
- i. E.g., Is. 26:16-19; Hosea 6:1-2; Ezek. 37:1-24 (The Valley of Dry Bones; v.10-14)
- f. **God promises to abolish death and raise the dead:**
- i. Is. 25:6-9; Dan. 12:2-3

## 2. Jesus' Self-Understanding:

### a. The promised Christ:

- i. "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" Mk 1:14-15
- ii. "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"; Lk 4:16-21

### b. The glorious Son of Man: Daniel 7:13-14

- i. As the Son of Man, Jesus claimed that:
  1. He would sit on the throne at God's right hand (Mt 19:28; 25:31)
  2. He would return in the clouds with power and great glory to judge the world (Mt 10:23; 13:41; 16:27; 24:30-31; 25:31; 26:64; Mk 8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62; Lk 9:26; 12:40; 17:22-30; 18:8; 21:27; 22:66-71; Jn 5:25-29)
  3. He came from heaven (Jn 6:62)
  4. He is the source of eternal life (Jn 6:27, 53-54),
  5. He is the bridge between heaven and earth (Jn 1:51)
  6. He is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mt 12:8; Mk 2:28; Lk 6:5).

7. He has the divine authority to forgive sins (Mt 9:1-7; Mk 2:1-12; Lk 5:17-26; 7:36-50)
8. He has the authority to resurrect the dead on the last day (Jn 5:21, 25-29; 6:54).

**c. The divine Son of God:**

- i. As the pre-existing Son of God (Jn 17:5)
  1. He alone knows the Father and he alone makes the Father known (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22)
  2. Has authority to judge the world, raise the dead, and be honored equally with the Father (Jn 5:21-23, 5:25-56, 6:40, 11:25),
  3. Does no less and no more than the Father (Jn 5:19)
  4. Gives eternal life to his sheep and secures their salvation (Jn 10:27-28, 6:27, 6:54, 17:2-3)
  5. Alone can say “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30) and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9) and “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:10).

**3. Jesus’ Signs and Wonders:**

**a. Demonstrated God’s approval of Jesus’ person and work: Acts 2:22-24**

**b. Demonstrated the arrival of God’s Kingdom**

- i. The ransomed will return from exile; God will save them and he will heal the blind, deaf and lame (Is. 35:4-6; See also Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23)
- ii. His authority to cast our demons proves Kingdom of God had come (Mt 12:28-29; Lk 11:20)

**c. Supported his claims to be the divine Son of God:**

- i. When he healed the paralytic he proved he had the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:10-12); miraculous feeding of the crowds (Mt 14:13-21); walking on the sea (Mt 14:22-23); calming of the storm (Mt 8:23-27) supported his divine claims because in the OT:
  1. God is the one that forgives sins, miraculously feed his people in the wilderness (Ex 16:12-13, 35; Num 11:31; Deut 8:3, 16; Ps 78:24; 105:40)
  2. God is the one who walks on and stills the waters (Job 9:8; Ps 77:18-19) and stills the waters (Ps 89:8-9, 65:7, 107:23-31)
    - a. Specific examples:
      - i. When he parted the Red Sea and stopped the Jordan river (Ex 14:021-22; Ps 106:9, 136:13)
      - ii. Calmed Jonah’s storm (Jonah 1:15-16)

**4. Jesus Prophesied His Death and Resurrection: Lk 24:44-49**

- a. 3 times in each Synoptic Gospel: suffer, be killed, and rise after three days (Mt 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:18-19; Mk 8:31, 9:31-32, 10:33-34; Lk 9:22, 9:44, 18:31-34);
  - i. Gospel of John: He will lay down his life and raise it up again on the third day (Jn 2:18-22 (“destroy this temple”), 10:14-18 (“I lay down my life for the sheep”))

- ii. Suffering Servant who gives his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45).
- b. The disciples did not understand Jesus' prophecies about his death and resurrection, nor did they expect Jesus to rise on the third day (Mk 9:32; Lk 9:45, 18:34; Jn 20:9):
  - i. Peter rebuked Jesus for speaking of his death and resurrection (Mt 16:21-23; Mk 8:31-33)
  - ii. Mary Magdalene thought someone stole the body (Jn 20:2) . . . and thought Jesus was a gardener who might have moved the body when he first approached her (Jn 20:15)
  - iii. The disciples did not believe the women's testimony about the empty tomb (Lk 24:11)
  - iv. The disciples on road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus (Lk 24:13-31)
  - v. The disciples were startled and frightened when Jesus first appeared to them (Lk 24:37)
    - 1. Jesus showed them see his hands and feet and had them touch him to convince them he was not "a spirit" but was "flesh and bones" (Lk 24:39)
  - vi. Thomas did not believe the other disciples when they told him (Jn 20:25).
- c. As first-century Jews, the disciples would have believed in an end-time resurrection, but they had no concept of the Messiah being killed and after three days rising again.

*But nobody imagined that any individuals had already been raised, or would be raised in advance of the great last day. There are no traditions about prophets being raised to new bodily life . . . There are no traditions about a Messiah being raised to life: most Jews of this period hoped for resurrection, many Jews of this period hoped for a Messiah, but nobody put those two hopes together until the early Christians did so.*

*N.T. Wright, The Resurrection of the Son of God (2003)*

## **Conclusion**

Jesus' bodily resurrection is consistent with its religious and historical context. More specifically, it is consistent 1) with the Old Testament teaching that God is able and plans to raise the dead bodily, 2) with Jesus' self-understanding as the promised Christ, the glorious Son of Man, and the divine Son of God, 3) with the signs and wonders God did through Jesus, and 4) with Jesus' prophecies about his death and resurrection. Moreover, the fact that no one expected the promised Messiah to be killed and rise on the third day makes it less likely that Jesus' resurrection was invented by the early church. The Gospels' presentations of the disciples not understanding Jesus' prophecies, nor understanding the Scriptures, nor believing in the resurrection are all marks of authenticity in the Gospels. This religious and historical context within which Jesus is claimed to have risen from the dead supports the overall argument that belief in the resurrection is entirely rational.