

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Gospel of John; plus other texts

TITLE: *CREDIBLE WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST*

BIG IDEA:

THE VALIDITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED BY A MULTITUDE OF CREDIBLE WITNESSES

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever been called on to be a witness in a court case? I had an interesting experience back in the beginning of my working career. I told you this story once before. I worked for about a year for a company that purported to help inventors bring their good ideas to the marketplace. I was in charge of their research team to write an initial report analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each invention. The firm charged a fee for this service and then if the idea had some merit they would try to sell the inventor on the next phase which involved some initial prototype development and even eventually marketing the product. The problem was that the company was unethical in some of the services and the value they offered to their clients. They misrepresented certain things. I ended up documenting what I could see that was out of bounds and left the company once I understood what they were doing.

The attorney general for the State of MD called me up years later when they were prosecuting a class action suit against the owner. They were looking for credible witnesses that would help them build a case. They had no idea that I had saved a whole bunch of documentation of how the company operated. I brought my notebook of info downtown and was interviewed by a staff of lawyers from the district attorney's office.

- I knew enough of the inner workings of the company to be helpful
- I had documentation of certain facts that could not be denied
- I had the character and objectivity they were looking for

Credible witnesses are the key to most legal cases. Sometimes you can get a verdict just with circumstantial evidence, but usually you need some type of witness support. When it comes to the validity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been blessed with an abundance of credible witnesses. As we celebrate Easter this morning, I just wanted to review with you some of that impressive testimony. Our faith does not stand on shaky ground. Remember Paul's argument in **1 Cor. 15:14-19**

“and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”

THE VALIDITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED BY A MULTITUDE OF CREDIBLE WITNESSES

I. WHAT MAKES FOR A CREDIBLE WITNESS? 4 CRITERIA:

A. Knowledge -- Personal Knowledge of the Event or Situation

What does the witness know and when did they know it??

What did they see? What did they hear? That's why so much evidence today revolves around the video and audio recording of events.

Second hand testimony or hearsay evidence will be thrown out

1 John 1:1-3

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life-- 2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

Requires the witness to pay attention and have a good memory

Somebody with some form of dementia or limited intellectual capability might not be able to translate their personal knowledge into credible testimony

B. Accuracy -- Accurate and Truthful Testimony Consistent with a Track Record of Good Character

If someone is a known liar and a low life – very difficult to rely on their testimony even if it is accurate in this instance – makes for a problem when you use criminals as informants – can we really believe what they say on the witness stand?

“Swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”

Prov. 14:5

*“A trustworthy witness will not lie;
But a false witness utters lies.”*

The bible speaks of severe judgment against those who are **false witnesses** --

It's good for politicians that God does not enforce this standard in an immediate sense like He did in the early church with Ananias and Sapphira who lied against the Holy Spirit and were struck down instantly.

Interesting that in a culture which seems to reject the concept of absolute truth in so many arenas – redefining truth in more experiential terms – what is true for you, etc.

When it comes to court cases they have no problem with the concept of absolute truth.

When it comes to evaluating the truthfulness of testimony – we look at other factors than just the facts they recite:

- Overall demeanor and confidence
- Body language

C. Motivation -- Objectivity and Impartiality Rather Than Personal Bias

Why is this witness coming forward to testify? What do they have to gain? Why would they

want to either protect or attack the person on trial?

The mother or the spouse might have excellent personal knowledge of the situation ... but might be perceived to be too biased to be helpful

Is there some type of financial gain or other considerations that might taint the weight of this testimony?

Did they cut some type of deal with the prosecution that has sweetened their own situation? Would not mean that they are necessarily lying ... but would hurt the credibility of their testimony.

Apostles not out to deceive anyone; not manipulating the message – certainly not in it for financial gain – instead they suffered for the sake of the gospel message

2 Peter 1:16

“For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

D. Consistency – Corroborating Testimony

They must be consistent in how they re-tell their story in different contexts. If they keep changing their story and modifying the details ... you have to wonder which version is accurate if any?

They must be consistent with the other witnesses that have credibility.

Deut. 17:6

“On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.”

Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke – different telling of the same stories; all dove tail together

Dangers Undermining the Credibility of Testimony:

- witnesses can be bought off
- witnesses can have a nefarious agenda so that they choose to lie
- witnesses cannot be very observant – just did not see things correctly
- witnesses can forget what they saw or be influenced by testimony of others

II. GOSPEL OF JOHN PROVIDES A MULTITUDE OF WITNESSES TO THE DEITY OF JESUS CHRIST AS THE UNIQUE SON OF GOD

Wait a minute ... I thought we were going to talk about witnesses to the **resurrection** of Jesus Christ ... we will get there .. but first we are going to lay a **foundation** from the Gospel of John ... a foundation that provides examples of credible testimony ... a foundation that establishes who this Jesus of Nazareth really is ... the validity of the Resurrection requires that Jesus really be who He claimed to be = the eternal Son of God who existed from all eternity, who came down from heaven to speak the words of God and who returned to heaven awaiting the day when He will come in judgment instead of offering salvation

Quick Overview of Gospel of John – read from the perspective of verses speaking to this concept of credible testimony:

A. The Witness of John the Baptist

1:7-8; 14-15; 19-23; 32-34

5:33

B. The Witness of Jesus Christ and God the Father

3:11, 26, 32-33

5:31-47

8:12-18, 45

10:25

14:9-10

17:6

18:37

21:1, 14

C. The Witness of the Apostles and Disciples of Christ – Supported by the Holy Spirit

12:17

14:17

15:26-27

20:21

21:24

III. CREDIBLE WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

Significance of the Resurrection:

MacArthur: Just as the heart pumps life-giving blood to every part of the body, so the truth of the resurrection gives life to every other area of gospel truth. The resurrection is the pivot on which all of Christianity turns and without which none of the other truths would much matter. Without the resurrection, Christianity would be so much wishful thinking, taking its place alongside all other human philosophy and religious speculation.

A. Divine Witnesses (covered in earlier overview of Gospel of John)

1. God the Father

Rom. 1:4 “*who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead*”

2. Jesus the Son

a. By Way of Prediction

(Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:17-19; 26:12, 28-29, 31-32; Mark 9:30-32; 14:28; Luke 9:22; 18:31-34; John 2:19-22; 10:17-18)

b. By Way of Fulfillment

3. The Holy Spirit

B. Angelic Witnesses

1. Sitting on the stone rolled back from the empty tomb

Matt. 28:1-7

The angels know where Jesus is at all times;
Were with Him after the temptation ordeal of forty days and nights in the wilderness to minister to Him;
Were certainly there at the Cross – marveling that He didn't call upon them to scorch the earth in judgment

*He could have called ten thousand angels
To destroy the world and set him free
He could have called ten thousand angels
But he died alone, for you and me*

Can't have witnesses of any better character than the holy angels – extremely credible

2. *Witnessing Ascension*

Acts 1:9-11

They understand God's program for the future – even when the disciples are confused about the timetable of Jesus entering into His kingdom on earth

3. *Surrounding throne of God where Jesus sits at right hand*

2 Thess 1:7 – He will return with His mighty angels – so they are with Him now in heaven

C. Human Witnesses

Luke 24:38-39 shows the nature of these appearances = “*flesh and bones*” = resurrected body; not just some spirit being; 40 day period before the Ascension – many opportunities; Christianity is a historical faith – based on historical realities; bodily resurrection is crucial

1. 1 Cor. 15:5-8 list – presented in chronological order – only representative

6 Listed Here:

a. Peter

“and that He appeared to Cephas”

Cephas – Aramaic name for Peter -- Mark 16:7; Luke 24:34

b. Apostles

“then to the twelve”

but Judas has gone out and died already; also Thomas was not there; Matt. 19:28; Acts 1 – Judas replaced by Matthias

c. Multitude of Brethren – more than 500 – most still alive

“After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep”

Could not have been fabricated or hallucinations; many of these still alive at the time of the writing of 1 Cor. – go and check out these people for yourself; too many for the opposition to shut up or eliminate; very impressive; preponderance of testimony

d. James (half brother of Jesus)

“then He appeared to James,”

Took some time to win him over ... but then he become loyal follower

Gal. 1:19; Acts 15:13; an *apostle* in the wider sense; a leader in the church at Jerusalem;

wrote the Epistle of James

e. Apostles Again

“then to all the apostles”

Probably a more general reference that goes beyond just the Formal 12

f. Paul Himself

“and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also”

(:9) Supreme Example of the Grace of God = Personal Testimony of the Apostle Paul Himself

■ His Undeserving Character

“For I am the least of the apostles”

“and not fit to be called an apostle”

■ His Unrelenting Persecution of the Church

“because I persecuted the church of God”

(:10A) Transformed Identity – by the Grace of God

“But by the grace of God I am what I am”

(:10B) Supreme Effort Directed Towards Sanctification and Service – Energized by the Grace of God

“And His grace toward me did not prove vain, but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”

2. There were **other appearances** not mentioned in this representative list:

- Mary Magdalene – John 20; Mark 16 = one who had been forgiven much and then loved much; very loyal to Christ; honored by seeing Christ first
- Bunch of other women – not impressive – but faithful and loyal; Matt 28:9-10
- Two on the Road to Emmaus – Luke 24; Mark 16
- the Seven by the sea shore – John 21
- Matt. 28:16-20
- Mt of Olives – Christ giving final instructions

APPLICATION: Absurdity of so many witnesses lying; no reason to be ashamed of the gospel; no reason to have questions about validity of the resurrection; make our boast in the living Lord Jesus Christ

Critical Witness today = YOU! Acts 1

“You are my witnesses”

Matt. 28 – Great Commission – Go and make disciples;

John 4 – Fields are white to harvest – Lord has prepared hearts; we need to sow the seed

Rom. 10 – How shall they repent and believe unless we go and preach the gospel

2 Tim. 2:8 *“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead”*

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Steve Zeisler: It appears that two kinds of evidence are on display here. In a court of law, juries find two things that are persuasive. The first is that the evidence for the case being tried be attested to not just by one, but by several witnesses. Paul demonstrates that not just several but five hundred people, most of whom were still alive when he wrote this letter, and so were available to confirm his words, saw the resurrected Jesus. And they would testify that it was in fact Jesus, not an apparition or a ghost, who appeared to them. In a resurrection body, fit for eternity, the Lord had eaten with them and fellowshiped with them. There was an abundance of evidence testifying to his resurrection.

And then Paul names three people to whom Jesus appeared, Cephas, James, and Paul himself, men for whom the evidence was deep as well as wide. Cephas, otherwise known as Peter, the self-promoter who was given to much talk, the man who had protested that he would never deny his Lord but who would later do so three times when confronted by a teenage girl, had become a changed man. Why? It was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and his appearance to Peter which set the apostle on his feet again. Peter was one who would attest to the fact of the resurrection and also the efficacy of that event.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, is the second eyewitness whom Paul mentions. We remember that at one time in his ministry the family of Jesus thought he was a disturbed man and sought to put him away for his own good. To them, Jesus was eccentric and incomprehensible. Even his own brothers failed to recognize his Messiahship. But to James, the little brother of Jesus who had rejected him during his earthly ministry, the Lord appeared after his resurrection. And this had the effect of making him also stand on his feet, and confirming him, with Peter, as a leader of the church.

Then we have this extraordinary description by the apostle of himself: "...and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am..." The words "untimely born," mean a miscarriage or an abortion. Paul regards himself as an ill-conceived, rejected person. On occasion, a pregnancy will terminate spontaneously because the fetus is diseased or malformed. The apostle is describing himself in these terms. He was a persecutor, an enemy of the church, an outsider who deserved nothing. Yet the Lord appeared to him. He refers humbly to the energy given him which enabled him to serve in the ministry to which he had been called.

Thus we have the testimony of a **preponderance of evidence**, and the **depth of character** of the three individuals called, to testify to the change that occurred in them because of the resurrection. The apostle is at pains to point out that these are reliable facts. (We will look at their implications later.) Be assured, however, says Paul, that we know what is true. Our hope for the forgiveness of our sins rests on a reality that cannot be taken away.