

# What I Received

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Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

There are two objections to Christianity that I hear most often. The first is that Jesus never claimed to be God. The objection is false, as we have discussed many times. But to help lay it to rest for us, so that there is clarity in our own minds, I will point out three specifics for you, and a fourth generalization.

First, John 8:58. Mark it in your Bible. Jesus tells his Jewish listeners, *“Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I AM.”* In your King James, it will begin, *Verily, verily*. The Greek word is one we use all the time without knowing what it really means: amen. The Greek word *amen* means “of a truth” or “truly.” Doubled for emphasis, amen amen, it means, “this truth is most true,” or “this is a most true truth.” And then Jesus identified himself with God’s name, which we learned in Exodus 3:14. Confirmation that Jesus was calling himself God is the fact that the Jews picked up stones in order to stone him to death for the grave sin of blasphemy. They heard him call himself God and it offended their deepest sensibilities and violated the Shema.

Second, John 10:30. Again, mark it in your Bible. The Jews ask Jesus to plainly and clearly tell them who he is: *“If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”* Jesus responds, *“I and the Father are one.”* Again, the Jews gather up stones to stone him to death for the grave sin of blasphemy. Jesus actually claimed that he was God in the flesh. It was tantamount to declaring, “I am God!” The Jews were deeply offended.

Third, John 14:9. Mark it in your Bible. At the Passover, Jesus told the disciples, *“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* Philip then asked Jesus, *“Show us the Father ...”* And Jesus responds, *“Don’t you know me, Philip ...? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”* Jesus then goes on to teach what we know as the Passover Discourse in which he promised the Holy Spirit, gives them his final command, tells them to remain in him, and prays for them. But three times, Jesus has very specifically identified himself as God.

And the generalization, because we don’t have time to explore them all, are the other seven “I AM statements” that we find in the gospel of John.

The second objection is to the resurrection of Jesus, and that will be our focus this Resurrection Sunday.

Objections to the resurrection began the very day of the resurrection, when the Pharisees and chief priests received the report that their guarded stone had been rolled away and Jesus was no longer in his grave (Mt 28:12). They paid the guards to tell a particular version of the story – that the

disciples had somehow overpowered them, stolen the body, and buried it elsewhere. And Matthew reports, *And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. **The stolen body theory.***

But all they had to do was arrest the disciples, torture them a bit, force them to admit where they hid the body, and display it for the world to see. Besides, for the guards to admit they had failed in their duty, and that trained soldiers had been overpowered by a few frightened fishermen, would have cost them their lives. The Pharisees knew that, so they had to tell Pilate and perhaps bribe him to keep the guards out of trouble. They would have had to admit to Pilate that Jesus had risen from the dead.

There is ***the swoon theory***, that a man whipped nearly to death, nailed to a cross, stabbed in the heart with a spear, had somehow only passed out, and in the cool damp of a stone cave had revived enough to push aside a heavy stone, overpower Roman guards, and escape. Unlikely in the extreme. Added to which, when Joseph of Arimathea tried to claim Jesus' body for burial, Mark reports that Pilate asked for a death certificate. *Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion* (an officer, by the way, who was expert at killing and responsible to be certain that execution was successful), *he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph* (Mk 15:44-45).

There is ***the substitute theory***, that at the last moment, Jesus had switched places with another person, a "body double", so that it was not Jesus who died on the cross, but someone else. But Roman soldiers did not lose prisoners. It was Jesus who was arrested, and they made sure they had the right man – see Mark 14:43-50. It was his own disciple who identified Jesus to them, and Jesus was in custody from that moment on.

There is also ***the wrong grave theory***, that the disciples forgot where Jesus was buried, and went to the wrong grave. Perhaps, in the dark of early dawn, the women got confused and went to the wrong grave. But nobody forgets where a loved one is buried. Not in the space of a weekend. Besides, all the skeptic would have to do is identify the correct grave, open it and show that the deceased is still there.

There is also a cultic explanation that some pseudo-Christian groups hold to: ***the spiritual resurrection theory***. That is, they hold that Jesus did not really physically rise from the dead, and they will tell you that it doesn't really matter. But they have the same problem as the wrong grave theory and the stolen body theory – they need to show that the physical body still lies in a grave somewhere.

And finally, of course, we have ***the mass hallucination theory***. In their grief, the disciples only thought they were seeing Jesus alive. That might work if it were just one at a time, but it doesn't work on a group basis. Besides, the witnesses deal decisively with that. Luke reports that the two who were on their way to Emmaus ran back to Jerusalem to report that they had seen Jesus. *While they were still talking, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. Jesus said, "Look at my hands and my feet.*

*It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have*” (Lk 24:36-37). And then, to prove he was physically alive, he asked for food and ate in their presence. Thomas thought the others were hallucinating when they reported that they had seen Jesus. A week later, Jesus appeared and invited Thomas to touch his hands and feel the wound in his side (Jn 20:19-29).

And now we come to Corinth, twenty years later, and Paul has to deal with skeptics in the church, who either deny the very possibility of resurrection altogether, or try to dismiss it as merely a spiritual event. As Paul has dealt with other problems in this divided church, he now turns his attention to the fundamental question of the resurrection, and he has three points to make: First, that the resurrection of Jesus is a real, historical event; second, that it matters; and what it means for us in the long run. And he begins here:

Twice, he has begun a discussion with “What I received I passed on to you.” The first time was in chapter 11 as he dealt with their understanding of the Lord’s Supper – *For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you* (11:24). And here in 15:3 – *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance ...* Notice that this is *a matter of first importance*. This is fundamental, and among the very first things we ought ever to know about Jesus. And Paul recounts for them (and us) the earliest creed of the Church we know. It was apparently formulated within the first five years of the Church, because it is something Paul learned shortly after his conversion. He passes it on:

*... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared ...*

We don’t have time to dig it all out this morning, but notice that both Jesus’ death and resurrection are *according to the Scriptures*. That is, they are a matter of Old Testament prophecy. His death fulfills Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53:4-10. His resurrection fulfills Isaiah 53:11-12; Hosea 6:2, and Jonah 1:17, as Jesus himself referred to “the sign of Jonah” (Mt 12:39-40; 16:4).

Paul notes that the resurrection is a real, historical event in that there are witnesses. At his arrest, Jesus was questioned about his teaching. He responded, *“I have spoken openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret”* (Jn 18:20). Nothing in secret. No mumbo-jumbo incantations. He spoke publicly so all could hear. In the same way, the resurrection was no secret. Paul wrote, *He appeared to Cephas (Peter), and then to the Twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time ... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also ...* I estimate, from the various resurrection appearance accounts, that there may have been over six hundred eye-witnesses who saw Jesus alive after the crucifixion. And Paul asserted that some of those five hundred were still alive when he wrote to the church. In other words, if you doubt me, go talk to them. They will tell you just what I’ve told you. Jesus is alive.

Someone in the church at Corinth was preaching that resurrection is impossible. It just doesn’t happen. I’ve never seen it happen. But it must be possible. Because it happened once. But *if there is no resurrection*, Paul wrote, *then not even Christ has been raised*. But that raises all sorts of complications for us. *If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

We are then liars about God since we have claimed that he raised Jesus from the dead. *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.* Notice the consequence here. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, what are you believing for? If Jesus did not rise, the cross was an exercise in futility. There is no redemption, no reconciliation, no atonement, no forgiveness. There is no Christianity without the resurrection. I've said it many times, if Jesus had only died, he would have been one of thousands of Jews crucified by the Romans, and his cross is as meaningless as all the others. There is no Christianity without the cross, but the cross cannot be the end of the story. Without the physical resurrection of Jesus, there is no cross, and there is no salvation, and whatever faith you have is worthless because it is based on air and pixie dust. Not only is the resurrection of Jesus a real, historical event, but it is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith. Without it, Jesus is reduced to a wandering, deluded, wannabe "messiah." Indeed, without the resurrection, we can only conclude that Jesus was a fraud. But we would never have even heard of him, lost among the thousands of Roman victims.

Not only is the resurrection fundamental to the Christian faith, it is the bases for our hope. *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* What do we hope for, if it all ends in death anyway? Even those who've gone before us, who we hope to meet again in heaven, just died and are just as lost as we are.

But then Paul fairly shouts, *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* Jesus is indeed alive. And because of that, we also may live. Jesus defeated death for us. He walked through the door first, and propped it open for us to follow. That's why we have hope. That's why we look forward to heaven and eternity. That's why we have mixed feelings at funerals – because the separation here causes us loss, but the hope of heaven gives us joy.

*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.* On the cross, Jesus defeated sin. In the grave, he defeated hell. In the resurrection, he defeated death. The last stronghold of the enemy has been breached. Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, *When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross* (Col 2:13-15). The triumph of the cross is in the resurrection. Jesus took on the powers and authorities and put them to public shame. He went into the battle and came out victorious. *"Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?"* Jesus has risen victorious.