

**§ 7. Doctrine of Christ**  
**Lecture 39**  
**The Historicity of the Post-Mortem Appearances**

We come now to the second major fact supporting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, and it is the post-mortem appearances of Jesus to various individuals and groups. We have already examined six lines of evidence in support of the historicity of the discovery of the empty tomb. Now we want to look at several lines of evidence in support of the historicity of these post-mortem appearances.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 Paul writes,

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is a truly remarkable claim. Its familiarity prevents us from realizing how astonishing this really is. We have here an indisputably authentic letter – no one disputes that the apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians – from a man who was personally acquainted with the original twelve disciples, and he reports that they actually saw appearances of Jesus alive after his death. More than that he says that he himself also saw such an appearance of Jesus.

So what are we to make of this remarkable claim? Once again time won't permit us to examine in detail all of the evidence in support of Jesus' post-mortem appearances, but I would like to examine with you three basic lines of evidence.

The first line of evidence is that Paul's list of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection appearances guarantees that such appearances occurred. In 1 Corinthians 15 we've seen that Paul gives a list of witnesses to various post-mortem appearances of Jesus. Let's look briefly at each appearance in the list to see whether it is credible that such an event actually took place.

First is the appearance to Peter, or Cephas which is the Aramaic name for the apostle Peter that Paul uses here. As we've seen in our biblical survey we don't have any story in the Gospels of Jesus' appearance to Peter, but the appearance is mentioned here in this old Christian tradition that Paul quotes and that goes back to within five years after Jesus' crucifixion originating in the Jerusalem church where Peter flourished and moreover this

tradition is vouched for by Paul himself personally who knew Peter. As we know from Galatians 1:18, Paul spent about two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem three years after his conversion on the Damascus Road. Galatians 1:18-19 says, “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.” Here Paul says that he spent two weeks – fifteen days – with Peter in Jerusalem and therefore he would know whether or not Peter claimed to have experienced a resurrection appearance of Jesus or not.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, the appearance to Peter is also alluded to in another very old Christian tradition which is found in Luke 24:34: “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” That Luke is working with a prior tradition here I think is evident by the awkward way in which this saying intrudes into the narrative of the appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke evidently didn't have a story to go with it of the appearance to Peter but he knew of this appearance and inserts it into his Emmaus Road narrative in this rather awkward fashion. So although we don't have any detailed story of the appearance to Peter, nevertheless it is quite well-founded historically. It is mentioned in the very ancient formula passed on by Paul, it is vouched for by Paul himself who had personal contact with Peter, and it is referred to in the old tradition quoted in Luke 24:34. As a result even the most skeptical New Testament scholars agree that Peter did experience a post-mortem appearance of Jesus. You can try to explain this psychologically as a hallucination or a visionary experience or whatever, but you cannot deny responsibly that it occurred. Virtually everyone agrees that Peter did have such a post-mortem appearance of Jesus.

Secondly is the appearance to The Twelve. Undoubtedly the reference here in Paul's formula is to that group of original disciples who had been chosen by Jesus to accompany him during his lifetime and that was known as The Twelve. Of course the appearance would have been an appearance to this group minus Judas who had apostatized by that time but nevertheless the official title of the group remained unchanged. It was “The Twelve.” This is the best attested resurrection appearance of Jesus. It, too, is included in this very old formula that is quoted by Paul as the second appearance in the list. Moreover, Paul himself had personal contact with members of the group of The Twelve. Moreover, we have seen that we have independent stories of this appearance in Luke 24:36-42 and John 20:19-20. We won't read them since we have already read those accounts when we did our biblical survey concerning the resurrection materials. But let me comment on what is undoubtedly the most notable feature of these two resurrection appearance stories, namely the physical demonstrations of Jesus showing his wounds to

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<sup>1</sup> 5:12

the disciples and then eating food in front of them. The purpose of these physical demonstrations is to show two things. First, that Jesus was raised physically. This wasn't some sort of an apparition or a vision. This was a material body that appeared before them. Secondly, it demonstrates that it was the same Jesus who had been crucified who now appeared before them. He bore in his hands and side the wounds which he had suffered on the cross. These physical demonstrations served to demonstrate two things about the nature of these resurrection appearances. First their corporeality, and secondly their continuity with the historical earthly Jesus. They demonstrate both corporeality and continuity of the resurrection body of Christ.<sup>2</sup> I think there is little doubt that such an appearance actually took place. It is attested in the old Christian tradition handed on by Paul. It is vouched for by Paul himself who had personal contact with The Twelve. It is also independently narrated in both Luke and in John.

Thirdly is the appearance to the five hundred brethren. This appearance comes, I think, as something of a shock. Paul says *then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time*. This is surprising because we have no story anywhere in the New Testament of such a stupendous resurrection appearances of Jesus. This, I think, might make you skeptical about the historicity of this appearance. Perhaps it is a legend or something of that sort that never really took place. But notice that Paul himself apparently had personal contact with these people because he knew that some of them had died in the interim between the appearance and the time of Paul's writing to the Corinthian church. This is seen in his parenthetical comment which he inserts: *most of whom are still alive though some have fallen asleep*. Why does Paul insert this parenthetical remark? *Most of them are still alive though some have fallen asleep*. The great New Testament scholar of Cambridge University, C. H. Dodd, has commented in this regard, "There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the five hundred are still alive, unless Paul is saying, in effect, 'the witnesses are there to be questioned.'"<sup>3</sup> Notice Paul could never have said this if the event had not occurred. He could not have challenged people to ask the witnesses if the event had never taken place and there were no witnesses. But evidently there were witnesses to this event which were about, and Paul knew that some of them had died in the meantime. Therefore, this event must have taken place.

I think that the reason that the appearance is not narrated in the Gospels is because it probably took place in Galilee. As you put together the various appearance stories in the

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<sup>2</sup> 10:01

<sup>3</sup> C. H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A study in the form criticism of the Gospels," in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1968), p. 128.

Gospels you find that the appearances occurred first in Jerusalem and then in Galilee and then finally in Jerusalem again. The appearance to five hundred people at one time would have to be outdoors. It would have to be an outdoor appearance. Perhaps on a hillside near a Galilean village. Remember it was in Galilee that thousands of people had flocked to hear Jesus teach during his ministry. Since the Gospels focus their attention on the Jerusalem appearances we don't have a story of the appearance to the five hundred because it probably occurred during that period in Galilee. An intriguing possibility is that this was the appearance that is predicted by the angel in the pre-Markan passion story where the angel says to the women, *He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.* Then this appearance is described in Matthew 28:16-17 as an appearance on a mountaintop in Galilee. We don't know if this was the same as the appearance to the five hundred brethren but it is certainly possible that this is the appearance that Paul is talking about.

Fourthly, the appearance to James. This appearance is one of the most amazing of all. Jesus appeared to James, his younger brother. What makes this amazing is that apparently neither James nor indeed any of Jesus' younger brothers believed in Jesus during his lifetime. We have this independently attested in Mark 3:21,31-35 and John 7:1-10.<sup>4</sup> Let's read Mark's account first:

And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for people were saying, "He is beside himself." . . . And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

Here the family of Jesus is portrayed as thinking that he was literally out of his mind. He was mad. So they went to try to corral him and perhaps bring him home. In John 7:1-10 we have a similar story:

After this Jesus went about in Galilee; he would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him. Now the Jews' feast of Tabernacles was at hand. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him. Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your

time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” So saying, he remained in Galilee.

But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private.

In this quite vicious story Jesus' brothers are portrayed as trying to goad Jesus into a death trap. They knew that the Jews in Judea were seeking to arrest Jesus and kill him. So they encouraged him to go up to the feast in Jerusalem and show himself publicly for everyone to see that he was who he claimed to be. John adds the remark his brothers didn't believe in him. They were doing something here that was extremely sinister.

By the criterion of embarrassment I think this is undoubtedly a historical facet of Jesus' life and ministry. Had his family members been faithful followers of Jesus all along there is no reason that the early Christian church would have invented such vicious stories about the unbelief of Jesus' family members. So it is historically certain, I think, that during his lifetime none of Jesus' brothers believed that he was anybody special.

But then, following the resurrection, all of a sudden Jesus' mother and brothers begin to show up in the Christian fellowship. Look at Acts 1:14: “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.” Where did they come from? All of a sudden here in the upper room as the Christians are huddled together his mother and his brothers are there in the upper room with them. There is no further mention of them until you get to Acts 12. Turn over to Acts 12:17. This is the story of Peter's deliverance from prison by the angel. What are the first words of Peter when he is released? Verse 17: “But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Tell this to James and to the brethren.’” Here James is a significant leader in the New Testament church.<sup>5</sup> Peter says, *Tell this to James. He needs to be notified*. In Galatians 1:19 we've seen that when Paul went up to Jerusalem three years after his conversion on the Damascus Road he met with both Peter and none of the other apostles except, he says, James the Lord's brother. In verse 19, “I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.” Clearly Paul at least implies here that James was being reckoned as an apostle now. He was being placed along with Peter and the other apostles as an apostle of Christ. When Paul visited Jerusalem again fourteen years later he says in Galatians 2:9 that there were three pillars of the church at that time: Peter, John, and James: “and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James

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<sup>5</sup> 20:13

and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” Now James has emerged to be one of the three pillars of the Jerusalem church. Finally, in Acts 21:18 James has become the sole head of the Jerusalem church. This is the story of the Jerusalem Council. It says in Acts 21:18, “On the following day Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present.” So it is James that is the head of the Jerusalem Council and the church in Jerusalem.

We don't hear anything more about James in the pages of the New Testament. But from Josephus, the Roman Jewish historian, in his *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.200, he says that James was stoned to death illegally by the Sanhedrin sometime after AD 60 during a lapse in the civil government. They took advantage of this lapse in the civil government to seize James and the Sanhedrin stoned him to death.

Not only did James become a believer in Jesus, but so did Jesus' other brothers. We can see this from Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 9:5. He says, “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” Here Paul claims for himself and for Barnabas the right to be accompanied on their journeys by a wife just like the other apostles Cephas and the brothers of the Lord Jesus.

How do you explain this? On the one hand, it is very clear that Jesus' brothers did not believe in Jesus during his lifetime. On the other hand, it is equally certain that they became ardent Christians who were active in Christian missionary activity. Jesus' crucifixion wouldn't make this change occur. Jesus' crucifixion would only confirm in James' mind that his elder brother was deluded in thinking that he was the Messiah. So there has got to be more than the crucifixion. Many of us have brothers. What would it take to convince you that your brother is the Lord so that you would be ready to be stoned to death for this belief? Can there be any doubt that the reason for this remarkable transformation in James is, as Paul says, the fact that *then he appeared to James*. Even the skeptical New Testament critic Hans Grass has said that the appearance of Jesus to James is one of the surest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

We still have the appearance to all the apostles and to Saul of Tarsus to discuss, but we are out of time. We will defer that until our next lesson together.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Total Running Time: 26:14 (Copyright © 2018 William Lane Craig)