

**§ 7. Doctrine of Christ**  
**Lecture 40**  
**The Postmortem Appearances**

We have been talking about the resurrection appearances of Jesus and have been going through the list supplied by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. We finished discussing the appearance to Jesus' younger brother James and how this brought about the remarkable transformation in his life.

The next appearance in the list is the appearance to all the apostles. Given that Paul's intention is to enumerate the different witnesses to the resurrection appearances it is unlikely that this is just the same group referred to as the Twelve. Rather the word “apostle” was used in the early church in a somewhat broader sense to indicate any sort of Christian missionary. This appearance was probably to such a limited circle of Christian missionaries which was somewhat broader than the group of the Twelve. For the existence of such a group see Acts 1:21-22. Luke writes:

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

Since Judas had apostatized and needed to be replaced, they chose to replace Judas from this group of people who had been with Jesus from the time of his baptism by John until the time of the ascension. So it was probably to such a limited group of missionaries that Christ then appeared. Again, the facticity of this appearance would be guaranteed by Paul's personal contact with these apostles themselves.

Finally, lastly, is the appearance to Saul of Tarsus. This appearance is just as amazing as the appearance to James. *Last of all*, says Paul, *he appeared to me also*. The story of Jesus' appearance to Saul of Tarsus, or to Paul of course, just outside of Damascus is related in Acts 9:1-9, and then it is told again twice in the book of Acts. That this event actually occurred is established beyond doubt by Paul's references to it in his own letters. This encounter changed Saul's entire life. He was a rabbi. A Pharisee. A respected Jewish leader. He hated the Christian heresy and did everything in his power to stamp it out. He says in his own hand that he was even responsible for the execution of Christian believers. And then suddenly he gave up everything. He left his position as a respected Jewish leader, and he became a Christian missionary. As such he entered into a life of poverty, labor, and suffering. He was whipped, beaten, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked three times, and in constant danger, deprivation, and hunger. Finally, he made the ultimate sacrifice and was martyred for his faith at Rome. And it was all

because on that day outside of Damascus, in his words, “I saw Jesus, our Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:1).

When you look at these resurrection appearances related by Paul, we are in contact here with extremely early historical information about the appearances of Christ to these various individuals and groups of people.

The second point that I want to adduce in support of the resurrection appearances is that the Gospel accounts provide multiple and independent attestation of the postmortem appearances of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> We have more than just Paul's account. The Gospels provide multiple and independent attestation of the postmortem appearances of Jesus. The Gospels independently attest to resurrection appearances of Jesus, even to some of the same appearances that are mentioned in Paul's list. The German New Testament scholar Wolfgang Trilling explains it this way:

From the list in I Cor. 15 the particular reports of the Gospels are now to be interpreted. Here may be of help what we said about Jesus's miracles. It is impossible to 'prove' historically a particular miracle. But the totality of the miracle reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact performed 'miracles.' That holds analogously for the appearance reports. It is not possible to secure historically the particular event. But the totality of the appearance reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact bore witness to himself in such a way.<sup>2</sup>

Trilling's point is that the appearance stories in general occupy such a broad swath of Gospel traditions in all four of the Gospels that even if you can't prove that this or that particular appearance occurred, all of these could not be dismissed as simply unhistorical fictions. It is evident from the breadth of these appearance stories in such a diversity of sources that there were these resurrection appearances following Jesus' death.

I think Trilling's conclusion is actually too modest: for just as we can justifiably infer the historicity of specific miracles of Jesus, for example his feeding of the 5,000, so we could infer the historicity of some of these specific appearances as well.

The appearance to Peter, for example, is universally acknowledged by New Testament critics.<sup>3</sup> The appearance to the Twelve<sup>4</sup> is, again, not in dispute even if many critics are

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<sup>1</sup> 5:11

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Trilling, *Fragen zur Geschichtlichkeit Jesu* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1966), p. 153. With respect to Jesus's miracles, Trilling had written: “We are convinced and hold it for historically certain that Jesus did in fact perform miracles . . . . The miracle reports occupy so much space in the Gospels that it is impossible that they could all have been subsequently invented or transferred to Jesus” (Ibid., p. 153). The fact that miracle working belongs to the historical Jesus is no longer disputed.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:5; Luke 24:34

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:5; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-20

skeptical of the physical demonstrations that are featured in these appearances. The appearance to the women disciples is independently attested by Matthew and John<sup>5</sup>, and it also enjoys ratification by the criterion of embarrassment given the awkwardness of having women witnesses to the resurrection appearances. It is generally agreed that the reason that the women do not appear in Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15 is precisely due to this embarrassment. It would be pointless to cite the witness of women to the resurrection appearances given their low credibility in that patriarchal culture. That Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee is independently attested by Mark, Matthew, and John.<sup>6</sup> When you put them together, the appearances seem to follow the pattern of the Jewish festival pilgrimages. First in Jerusalem for the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then the disciples went back to Galilee, and then there were Galilean appearances. Then two months later they returned to Jerusalem again for the Pentecost feast, and there were the final resurrection appearances of Jesus.

So what should we conclude from this? Well, you can dismiss the appearances as hallucinations if you want to, but you cannot deny that the events themselves actually occurred. The late New Testament critic of the University of Chicago, Norman Perrin, puts it this way: "The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based."<sup>7</sup> The skeptical German New Testament critic, Gerd Lüdemann, who is perhaps one of the most important of the critics of the resurrection today, himself says (his words, not mine), "It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."<sup>8</sup>

The evidence then makes it certain that on separate occasions following the death of Jesus different individuals and groups of people had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion, I think, is virtually undisputed today among New Testament scholars.

Let's go to the third and final point, and that is that the resurrection appearances were physical, bodily appearances. So far the evidence that I presented doesn't depend upon the nature of the postmortem appearances of Jesus. I've left it an open question whether or not they were merely visionary in character or physical in nature. It remains to be seen whether even visionary experiences of Jesus after his death could be plausibly explained on the basis of just psychological models. But if these appearances were physical and

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:9-10; John 20:11-17

<sup>6</sup> Mark 16:7; Matthew 28:16-17; John 21

<sup>7</sup> Norman Perrin, *The Resurrection According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?* Trans. John Bowden (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> 10:48

bodily in nature then a purely psychological explanation of them becomes next to impossible. So I think it is worth examining what we can know historically about the nature of these appearances. I would like to make two points in general in this regard.

First, Paul gives reason for thinking that these appearances were bodily, physical appearances. He does so in two ways as we will see. Secondly, the Gospels also support the bodily, physical nature of the resurrection appearances and they also do so in two ways.

First let's talk about Paul. The first point is that Paul conceives of the resurrection body as physical. Paul thinks of the resurrection body as a physical body. You will remember when we looked at 1 Corinthians 15:42-45 we saw that Paul describes the differences between the present earthly body and the glorious resurrection body. He drew four essential contrasts between the earthly body and the resurrection body. The earthly body is mortal; the resurrection body is immortal. The earthly body is dishonorable; but the resurrection body is glorious. The earthly body is weak; the resurrection body is powerful. The earthly body is natural; but the resurrection body is spiritual. We saw that only the last of those contrasts might lead you to suspect that the resurrection body is anything less than physical. But, as we saw, when Paul talks about this distinction between natural and spiritual he is not talking about the constitution of the body but of its orientation. We can tell that by looking at the way he uses the same distinction in 1 Corinthians 2 earlier in his letter to describe the difference between the natural man and the spiritual man. The "natural man" does not mean the visible, tangible, material man, nor does the "spiritual man" mean the invisible, intangible, unextended man, whatever that would be. Rather, Paul is talking about people who are oriented toward the human nature or those who are oriented and dominated by the spirit of God. Similarly, when it comes to 1 Corinthians 15 the contrast is exactly the same. The natural body is the earthly body under the domination of the fallen human nature. The spiritual body will be the same body now glorified but under the domination and control of the Holy Spirit, a body fully empowered and directed by God's Spirit. But it will be a body. So Paul's doctrine of the resurrection body implies a physical resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

The second point under Paul is that Paul and all of the New Testament makes a conceptual distinction between a resurrection appearance of Jesus and a vision of Jesus. He makes a distinction conceptually between a resurrection appearance of Christ and a vision of Christ. I am not talking about a linguistic distinction. The same vocabulary can be used of each, but they are conceptually distinct. The resurrection appearances of Jesus soon ceased. They were confined to a very limited time after Christ's crucifixion. But visions of the exalted Christ continued on in the early church. The question is then what

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<sup>10</sup> 15:07

is the essential difference between a vision of the risen Lord and a resurrection appearance of the risen Lord? The answer in the New Testament to that question seems to be pretty clear. A vision, even if it is caused by God, is something that is purely in the mind while a resurrection appearance took place out there in the external world. I think you can see the difference between these two by comparing Stephen's vision of Jesus in Acts 7 with the resurrection appearances of Jesus narrated by Luke. Stephen saw an identifiable bodily image of a man in heaven, but what he saw was a vision, not a man who was actually physically present before him because nobody else experienced anything at all. This was a visionary seeing on Stephen's part, not something that was taking place in the external world where others would see it. By contrast, the resurrection appearances took place in the external world where they could be perceived by anybody that was present. Paul could rightly regard his experience on the Damascus Road as a genuine resurrection appearance even though it took place after Jesus' ascension and therefore was highly unusual because it did involve manifestations in the external world which were also experienced by Paul's traveling companions to various degrees. This conceptual distinction between a vision and an appearance of Jesus I think also implies that the resurrection appearances were physical and bodily appearances.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Since Lüdemann agreed that there had been an encounter by Paul and others, is he still a skeptic because he attributes that to being a vision?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that is right. Lüdemann is one of those who is trying to revive the old hallucination hypothesis. He believes that what happened was that Paul and Peter each were laboring under guilt complexes. Peter had denied his Lord three times and felt guilty about it. Paul felt guilty under the Jewish law for his sins. He was secretly attracted to Christianity because of its message of grace and forgiveness. So, in order to alleviate these guilt complexes, he suggests that Peter and Paul both hallucinated visions of Jesus. This is what then led to the belief in the resurrection appearances. This is a good example of someone who will admit the facticity of the event. He admits they had these experiences, but then he will try to provide some naturalistic explanation of these. So, when it comes to finding what the best explanation of these appearances are, we will revisit this question: could they have really been hallucinations? As I say, if this point is right – that they were physical and bodily in nature – then I think it just completely undercuts the hallucination hypothesis from the get-go, from square one.<sup>11</sup>

*Student:* Paul describes the body raised as imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual, but none of these words describe physical. Every word here is a spiritual word.

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<sup>11</sup> 20:07

*Dr. Craig:* Let me put it this way. None of those adjectives imply physicality. I think that is true. But that physicality is implied already in Paul's use of the word *soma*. *Soma* is the Greek word that means body. Paul doesn't believe in the immortality of the soul alone. He says that there will be a resurrection body, a resurrection *soma*. Those adjectives don't imply physicality, but my point is they do not deny it. In describing the resurrection body as glorious, powerful, immortal, and spiritual, there is nothing that would suggest this is no longer a tangible, physical, extended entity. In fact, that is comprised by the word "body." That is what a body is.

*Student:* Last week we were talking about spiritual experiences or experiential knowledge. I did have experiential knowledge of God talking to me. But it is not an audible sound, but it is a clear understanding. Due to the lack of vocabulary, I will say "God told me this." It will sound like it is a physical talking, but it is a clear...like in *Experiencing God* that Dr. Henry Blackaby says that everybody that God talks to knows that God is talking to them. Yet it may not be a physical verbal communication. But it is a clear communication of the spiritual nature. I just don't have the vocabulary for that.

*Dr. Craig:* I understand. I am going to just make an application and then say something and then we will close. Could the application here be these resurrection appearances weren't really physical and bodily, but due to the limits of Paul's vocabulary he had to describe them in such a way that just as somebody might think when you say, *God told me to do this*, they thought you heard this audible voice speaking to you, so when Paul says, *I saw Jesus our Lord*, that they think he means this in this sort of physical, visible way. I don't think that is a good response to what I just shared. Think of the two points that I just made. It is not just that Paul uses phenomenal language in saying, *I saw Jesus*, or, *Jesus appeared to me*, which is admittedly ambiguous. It is that he uses words like *soma*, body, that Christ has a body with which he rises from the dead. A body that will be the pattern and model for our own resurrection body. I think it is clear that Paul is using objective language here, not just subjective personal first-hand reports. He is talking about Christ will have a body. Secondly, think of this conceptual distinction between a resurrection appearance and a vision. I don't know what that difference would be on the model that we say this is just due to limited vocabulary on Paul's part. Then that distinction just falls apart. It wouldn't make any sense. The best way to understand this distinction that not only Paul but the whole New Testament makes between a resurrection appearance and a mere vision of the exalted Lord is that the one was subjective and in your mind (the vision) but that the appearances were extra-mental and occurred in the real world. I think in making these two points I have implicitly undercut the suggestion that this is due simply to Paul's limited ability to express what must have been numinous and phenomenal experiences.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>12</sup>**