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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS

UNIT 15: RESURRECTION!

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is a climactic high point of all four gospels and one on which the whole Christian faith rests. As a result, no other event that the gospels record has been so consistently attacked by unbelievers (see Note 1). In this unit we will look at the evidence that does exist for the resurrection, some of the important details surrounding it, and the profound significance of this event.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The Old Testament contains a number of scriptures hinting at the resurrection of the body. In Job, for example, we read the famous words “If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made” (Job 14:14–15). In the psalms, David is even more explicit; “you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay” (Psalm 16:10). David was clearly speaking of a messianic figure, however, and we see the same in Isaiah: “For he was cut off from the land of the living ... He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death ... and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days” (Isaiah 53:8–10).

In New Testament times the situation is clearer. Josephus describes different ideas regarding the resurrection among the main Jewish sects of the first century. He states that the Sadducees believed both the body and the spirit ceased to exist after death; the Essenes believed that the spirit was immortal but the body was not; and the Pharisees taught that the spirit was immortal and the body would eventually be resurrected to house it. Jesus clearly disagreed with the Sadducees, and his teaching on this point was similar to that of the Pharisees (Luke 20:27–40). The gospels show Jesus taught that he would be resurrected (Matthew 12:38–40; etc.) and also show that he taught, and his followers believed, in the eventual resurrection of all the just (John 11:23–24). Paul and other New Testament writers expand on this understanding (1 Corinthians 15; etc.), and seen in retrospect, the doctrine of the resurrection is clear.

The Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection

But biblically clear or not, as we stressed above, many do not believe the resurrection of Christ occurred. In the following points we will briefly look at some of the biblical texts and historical facts that are strong indicators that his resurrection did indeed take place.

1) Jesus was buried in a known tomb. It would have been very easy for Jesus’ followers to claim he had been resurrected if he had been buried in some unknown tomb. However, the exact location of the tomb in which Jesus’ body was placed is given in three of the four gospels (Matthew 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; John 19:38–42).

2) Roman guards were stationed at the sealed tomb precisely to stop anyone stealing the body. Because sleeping while on guard was punishable by death, it is highly unlikely the guards would have both done so – or that they would have slept through the removal of the large stone sealing the tomb and the theft of Jesus' body. All four gospels reference this situation (Matthew 27:62–66; 28:4,11–15; Mark 16:1–6; Luke 24:1–8; John 20:1–10).

3) The tomb was sealed by a large stone probably weighing several tons and would have taken many men to move it, which would have made a secret removal of the body unlikely. Jesus or the angels rolled away this stone not so he could get out of the tomb, of course, but so others could get in and see that the body was no longer there (Matthew 28:2; etc.).

4) The “empty tomb” wasn't empty. John's Gospel shows the tomb was not completely empty – that the grave clothes of Jesus were still in place (John 20:1–7). This is an important detail because the penalty for grave robbing was severe and if the body had been stolen, it is highly unlikely that the thieves would have taken the time to remove the grave clothes and carefully lay them out in the tomb.

5) Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. The testimony of women was not accepted as legally valid in first century Judea. As a result, no one fabricating a story of the resurrection would have chosen women as the first and primary witnesses of the resurrected Jesus, as this would have greatly reduced the credibility of the story (Matthew 28:1–10; Luke 23:55–24:11; Mark 16:1–11; John 20:11–18).

6) More than 500 witnesses eventually saw the resurrected Jesus. The gospels tell us that after appearing to the women, Jesus later appeared to a great many other people. The apostle Paul summarizes: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: 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 to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:3–6).

7) Many were willing to die for the truth of the resurrection. Apart from Judas, who committed suicide, and the apostle John who was exiled at the end of his life, all the original apostles died a martyr's death – many under torture – rather than agree that Jesus had not been resurrected. The book of Acts shows that, beginning with the martyr Stephen, many others who were alive at the time of Jesus also chose death because of their certainty of Christ's resurrection (Acts 7:54–60). While people might be willing to die for a lie they believe to be true, it is unlikely that someone would die for a story they knew was false.

8) Written testimony of Jesus' resurrection dates back to the same generation that was alive at the event. The inhabitants of Jerusalem – including Jesus' enemies – who were alive at the time the apostle Paul wrote of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:4; etc.) could have challenged Paul's claim, but no written texts from the time do so. Remember also that Paul was an enemy of Christianity who became converted.

9) A great many people close to the time believed the resurrection had occurred. Many scholars feel that the resurrection of Jesus is the only plausible explanation for the rapid growth of Christianity in the first centuries following the event. It is estimated that from the time of the apostles to around AD 300 the church grew by some 40% per decade – taking Christianity from a very minor Jewish sect to the largest religion in the Roman Empire.

10) The so-called Nazareth Inscription may indicate Rome's concern about the upheaval caused by Jesus' resurrection. Although few details are known of its origin, a marble tablet discovered in 1878 and known as the Nazareth Inscription (currently in the collections of the Louvre Museum in France) sheds light on

the era of the resurrection. The tablet bears an edict from an unnamed emperor ordering capital punishment for anyone caught disturbing graves or tombs. The inscription has been dated to the first century AD, and the social upheaval in the Roman Empire caused by the rapid growth of the Christian religion may have been the underlying cause of this Roman edict.

Individually, many of these ten points are cogent arguments for Jesus' resurrection from the dead; taken together they represent powerful evidence for the reality of the event. From the information found in the New Testament, extra-biblical texts written close to the time, the rapid growth of the Christian faith, and other historical and logical facts, we have far greater indication of the fact of the resurrection than we do for a great many historical events that are universally accepted. Together, these and other indicators allow us to confidently accept that Jesus was indeed resurrected from the dead.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The first point that can help us obtain a fuller understanding of the resurrection of Jesus is the timing of the event. The resurrection occurred on the exact day of the Jewish firstfruits or "wave sheaf" offering. According to the Mosaic law, this was made the day after the first annual Sabbath day of the Passover week (see Note 2). Moses instructed the Israelites: "bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the Lord so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath" (Leviticus 23:9-14). In New Testament times, as the annual Sabbath ended, the priests went to a field on the outskirts of Jerusalem and cut a sheaf of choice first-ripe grain – the "firstfruits" of the crop which was "waved" or lifted up the following day. The ritual signaled the very beginning of the barley harvest, and in the year Jesus died it fell on the Sunday of the resurrection. Spiritually, we can see the obvious symbolism of this offering pointing to the resurrected Jesus as the firstfruits in God's plan of harvest, just as Paul pointed out: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

The four gospels may seem to differ in their accounts of the events directly after the resurrection, but by combining the accounts it seems that very early on Sunday morning Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James (the "other Mary" of Matthew 28:1), and several other women went to the tomb, where they saw that the stone had been rolled away. There they saw and talked with an angelic being who told them Jesus was not there, but was risen and instructed them to tell "his disciples and Peter" (a mark of acceptance for Peter after his betrayal) to go to Galilee where they would see Jesus. When Peter and John heard the news from Mary Magdalene they went to the tomb, but they did not fully understand what had occurred and left (John 20:1–10). Then Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and – apparently separately – to the other women (see Note 3).

It is interesting that Jesus appeared to several more individuals – to Peter and later to two others on the road to Emmaus – all before appearing to the whole group of the disciples. But after these initial appearances Jesus appeared to the apostles and others numerous times. This was over a period of forty days between his resurrection and ascension and included two times when Jesus appeared to his disciples in Galilee – two appearances that were particularly important.

On one of these occasions, when the apostles went to Galilee and met Jesus there as he had told them to do, we read: "the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matthew 28:16–17). The doubt expressed by some of the disciples should be properly understood. This was not disbelief (for which the Greek word is *isapistia*), as they doubtless would not have gone to Galilee if they had not believed it was possible that Jesus had been resurrected. The Greek word translated "doubt" is *distazo* "to waver" or "to hesitate"

(see Note 4), so the hesitation of some of the apostles may have been hesitation to worship him (as the text may imply) because they were still processing the understanding that he was God. In this appearance Jesus also delivered a commission to the apostles, but we will examine that in the final unit of this course. It was after this event that Jesus appeared to his half-brother James (1 Corinthians 15:7), who was then converted and went on, with Peter, to become one of the great leaders of the church.

In the other recorded appearance in Galilee, Jesus appeared to Peter, John, and five other disciples, by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1–22) and it was in this meeting that Jesus fully reinstated Peter. The reinstatement took place over a meal which was an important symbolic part of cementing interpersonal relationships in that culture (see Note 5). Because Peter had, of course, publicly denied Jesus three times after his Lord’s arrest, he was now given the opportunity to publicly affirm his love for Jesus three times by answering Jesus’ repeated question “Simon son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:15–17 and see Note 6).

It is often noted that while Peter replies that he loves Jesus with *philein* (brotherly love) all three times, Jesus used the word *agapan* (spiritual love) in his first two questions and only drops to *philein* the final time he asked. *Philein* is a less elevated and spiritual love (see Note 7) indicating Peter felt sure of the natural affection which it expressed; but was now humbled to the point he could not claim the greater love implied in *agapan*. Peter had claimed he would die for Christ – suggesting he loved the Lord more than the other disciples did – so Jesus’ questions are not only about whether Peter loved him, but whether Peter now proudly claimed to love Jesus more than the others (“more than these”) as he had done earlier. The reinstatement involved a probing of Peter’s pride as much as his love. As the reinstatement was established, Jesus proceeded to redirect Peter to the work for which he had been called – to feed and shepherd Christ’s flock. This was an important part of the commission Jesus would leave his disciples and was certainly one of the many important events associated with the resurrection.

CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Sadly, in a misguided effort to make Christianity more acceptable to those who do not believe in miracles, some teach that one does not have to believe in Jesus’ resurrection in order to be a Christian. The New Testament shows that is simply untrue and teaches that the resurrection is a fundamental aspect of our faith. In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul makes it clear that if Jesus was not raised from the dead then Christianity itself is not true and our faith is useless: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised” (1 Corinthians 15:14-15 ESV).

As we have seen, the gospels list ten separate appearances of Jesus after his resurrection – precisely so that we can believe in its reality. These appearance accounts cannot be simply ignored and are fundamental to the truth of the Bible. Fortunately, most Christians do accept the truth of the resurrection, and understand its importance. But even so, when we hear the gospel preached today, the focus is often only on the cross. That is, in many cases the resurrection is only a matter of focus at one brief time in the year. In contrast, the book of Acts shows the early apostles continually stressed the resurrection of Jesus, and it was clearly a central part of the gospel they preached. It was certainly the central part of Peter’s inspired speech on the day the New Testament church was formed through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:22–33). Notice also Paul’s clear teaching on the importance of the resurrection:

If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

The Son of God died for our sins *and* rose again, conquering both sin *and* death in these events. The former does not help us without the latter. As Paul wrote: “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:10).

The resurrection also confirms a number of additional vital truths.

1) *The empty tomb is the greatest proof of Christ's deity.* The resurrection was particularly important because it gave credibility to Jesus’ words – proving beyond doubt that he was who he said he was – the Son of God. Jesus himself said that his resurrection would be the only sign that would be given to those who demanded proof of his identity: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Thus, Paul tells us that Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4 ESV).

2) *The resurrection of Jesus confirms our justification before God.* This is because when Jesus rose again he was declared to be righteous – not just without sin, but embodying holiness – and we are justified by that righteousness as Paul tells us “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25). That is also why Paul wrote that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; *you are still in your sins*” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

3) *The resurrection guarantees God's power will work in our lives now.* Salvation is more than just accepting that Jesus canceled out our sins – it involves a personal relationship with a living Jesus who did not stay in the grave but was raised from the dead and now works within our lives today. That is why the ordinance of baptism symbolizes not only our death with Christ, but also our rising with him to a new life – just as Paul wrote: “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). Paul speaks frequently about this very fact, showing that the resurrection of Jesus calls us to a new life in him: “he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:15 and see also Ephesians 1:19,20; etc.).

4) *The resurrection of Jesus guarantees the future resurrection of all believers.* Just as Jesus was the firstfruits of God’s harvest, so his resurrection points to those who are his and who will be raised in the later, wider, harvest. Paul states this emphatically in saying “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep ... 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” (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). Paul also tells us that the same power that God used to raise up Jesus will be used to raise us in our resurrection: “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also” (1 Corinthians 6:14), and “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). That Jesus’ resurrection is a guarantee of our own could not be clearer in the Scriptures – that is why Jesus stated: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11:25).

For all these reasons, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, along with his death, are the two most important events to have occurred since the creation of the world. The appearances of Jesus that occurred after his resurrection not only provided proof of the event to a great number of witnesses, but also provided opportunities for Jesus to correct confusion among his disciples (Acts 1:6–7), to prepare them for their eventual receipt of the Holy Spirit, and to give them guidance regarding the work that he would do through them and his church (Acts 1:2).

* Note 1: Detractors of the Bible often claim that the belief in certain dying and rising gods that is known to have existed in the ancient world – for example, the story of Osiris in Egypt – was somehow borrowed by the early Christians and applied to Jesus. This claim will not be seriously considered here as there are a good many published studies that effectively refute the idea. We will simply note that the so-called dying and rising god myths are really nothing like the resurrection story as found in the gospels. Death is a universal problem and ancient stories often were based on the idea of finding some way of avoiding or overcoming it.

* Note 2: Regarding the day of the firstfruits or wave sheaf offering, Josephus wrote: “On the second day of unleavened bread, that is to say the sixteenth [day of the month of Nisan], our people partake of the crops which they have reaped and which have not been touched till then” (*Antiquities* 3.250-251).

* Note 3: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20 each contain an account of the visit of the women to the tomb on the morning of the resurrection. At first sight these accounts might seem to conflict, but it is easy to harmonize them if we assume that Mary Magdalene separated from the other women after the initial events at the tomb in order to find Peter and the disciple “Jesus loved,” and that the other disciples were not with Peter and John at that time and were informed of the empty tomb by the other women. The fact that John only mentions Mary Magdalene (John 20:1–2) supports the idea that she returned separately from the other women. John also mentions the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene after Peter and John visited the tomb (John 20:11–18), while Matthew records that Jesus appeared to the women (presumably without Mary Magdalene) later while they were still on the way to tell the other disciples what they had seen (Matthew 28:9–10).

* Note 4: The word *distazo* translated “doubt” is used in only one other place in the New Testament – in the account of Peter walking on the water to Christ. This instance clearly shows the word does not mean unbelieving doubt: “Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” (Matthew 14:29-31). Here we see that Peter did not doubt that he could walk on the water and began to do so – but then he began to waver or “doubt” in the sense of hesitate.

*Note 5: We should probably view many of the meals recorded in the gospels in the light of interpersonal relationship rather than just as meals. The Last Supper is an obvious example, but the principle applies many times. For example, Acts 1:4 records “On one occasion, while he was eating with them” and the expression “eating with” (sometimes translated “gathered with”) literally means to eat salt together. This may explain Jesus’ otherwise enigmatic expression “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50 ESV) – “eating salt” together was symbolic of a peaceful interpersonal relationship.

*Note 6: Although Jesus is often said to have renamed Simon as “Peter” when he became his disciple (John 1:42), Jesus actually said “you will be called Peter” in the future tense. With only one exception, Jesus is never recorded as referring to Simon as Peter – the name only took hold eventually (just as Jesus said “you will be called ...”) after Peter took a leading part in the apostolic church. We see him called “Peter” or “Simon Peter” by the gospel writers, of course, because their accounts were written at that later time.

* Note 7: This does not necessarily mean that Peter’s reply to Jesus using *philien* implied limited love. When Jesus said “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35), he used the word *philien*.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics: Select and memorize at least one scripture given in this unit showing that belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a necessary part of being a Christian. Select and memorize at least one additional scripture from the unit showing that the resurrection of Jesus points to our own future resurrection.

Beneath the Surface: Think about Paul's statement in Romans 5:10: "For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" What does Paul mean when he says we are "saved through his life"?

Everyday Applications: Think about the statement "The resurrection demonstrates that no matter how bad things might look in the here and now of this life, God has the power to change me and/or change my circumstances." In what ways can you apply this statement in your own life right now?

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