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SKEPTICS OF THE RESURRECTION, PART ONE

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Matthew 28:11–15

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.

And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers,

Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.

And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you.

So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

You know very well that the world is increasingly hostile to the message of the Gospel. Just before Resurrection Sunday last year, Benjamin Radford wrote an article entitled “Resurrection: A History of Myths” for a publication called *Live Science*.¹ His point is that the resurrection of Christ is really nothing remarkable; it fits in nicely with many other “myths” that have been offered to gullible people down through the ages. He concludes with this statement: “As fantastic as the world’s resurrection stories are, they can’t hold a candle to the legend of a friendly rabbit who dispenses colored chicken eggs to children once a year.”

From the very beginning, we find people trying to discredit the Resurrection. In fact, the very first attempts are recorded for us in Scripture! In Matthew 28:11-15 we find that the soldiers reported the events of the Resurrection to the priests. Can you see them? They are duty-bound to make their report, but I’m sure they were thinking and talking amongst themselves on the way, “Oh, we are dead! Dead, dead, dead!” However, the priest gave them money to tell people that while they were sleeping (for which they would be executed!), the disciples came and took the body. The priests then promised the soldiers that if the governor “got wind” of their testimony that they were sleeping, the priests would make sure the soldiers were unharmed. It’s a lame story, though: if they were sleeping, how did they know the disciples came and took the body? You’ll also notice that the priests did not make an attempt to find the grave robbers or a body. They could not *refute* the evidence; they merely *rejected* it.

I believe that some of the very best evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ stems from His interactions with the skeptics—the people who *refused* to believe in Him and who *rejected* the evidence that they could only attempt to suppress. Under normal

1 Benjamin Radford, “Resurrection: A History of Myths.” April 9, 2009. Available at <http://www.livescience.com/history/090409-bad-resurrection-myths.html>

circumstances, that would sound contradictory: “They saw the very best evidence, and yet they did not believe.” Is this a valid assertion?

Bertrand Russell was a well-known skeptic of the Gospel. Someone once asked him, “If you meet God after you die, what will you say to Him to justify your unbelief?” Russell replied, “I will tell Him that He did not give enough evidence.”

Noted Christian philosopher Ravi Zacharias puts it this way:

Interestingly enough, to those like Bertrand Russell who contend that there is a paucity [scarcity] of evidence, the Bible makes a staggering counterpoint. The Scriptures categorically state that the problem with such people is not the absence of evidence; it is, rather, the *suppression* of it. The message of Jesus Christ shifts the charge of insufficiency from the volume of evidence to the intent of one’s will.

Was Jesus implying that belief is nothing more than a blind commitment of the will? I think not. But He did say, in effect, that if you test His claims by the same measure that you legitimately substantiate other facts, you will find Him and His teaching thoroughly trustworthy. The evidence is already there. The denial of Christ has less to do with facts and more to do with the bent of what a person is prejudiced to conclude.²

Ravi Zacharias then offers the following quote from Thomas Nagel, professor of philosophy at New York University:

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don’t mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions . . . in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical [scientifically established] falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper—namely the fear of religion itself. . . . I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and naturally, hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.³

We see then that there are skeptics who do not see the evidence, and then there are those who are committed to unbelief. One might accept the evidence after an honest evaluation, and the other would not, no matter how much evidence was presented. His mind was made up beforehand.

2 Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), p. 51.

3 Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 130. Quoted in Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, p. 51.

And so, the question remains, *What evidence do we have?* But to this we add, *Will you honestly evaluate the evidence?* I want to present today and next week a brief summary of some of the evidences of the deity of Jesus Christ, focusing on His Resurrection.

FIRST, HIS VIRGIN BIRTH

The first evidence we offer is the circumstances of His birth. The modern skeptics generally disregard this off hand. Wouldn't it stand to reason that the skeptics of Jesus' day would have also rejected this claim? But the fact of the virgin birth stood scrutiny to the minutest detail for those who sought to disprove it during Jesus' time on earth. His birth and life were the perfect fulfillment, not of one prophecy or two, but of hundreds—and the scholars and scribes of His day could not point to a single one that He did not perfectly fulfill. How can one fulfill prophetic uttering as to the exact time and place of one's own birth?

Not only that, but for Mary to claim a virgin conception in her day would have been suicide if there had been no evidence to support her claim. The penalty for being with child out of wedlock was either death or social ostracism. Her cousin Elizabeth was told by an angel that her son John would “play second fiddle” to a younger cousin, Jesus; and that is something far out of the ordinary in a culture where family position and power mean everything.

And so, in spite of their searching for evidence to contradict this claim, they could not find any evidence to show that Jesus did not fulfill the prophecies surrounding the birth and life of the Messiah. *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they examined His claims and could not refute them.*

SECOND, HIS PRISTINE LIFE

Over the course of His lifetime, the skeptics tried to find fault with Him, even to the point of laying traps for Him; but they could never find fault with Him. In fact, at His trial, they had to pay witnesses to bring false testimony against Him—a clear violation of the Law which they pretended to love. Jesus challenged them to find fault in Him throughout His lifetime; and though they tried their utmost, they could find no fault in Him. No one else in history can make this claim with any sort of credibility. *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they examined His life and could not find fault.*

THIRD, HIS RESURRECTION

When Jesus went to the temple at Passover and found the moneychangers and priests collaborating to take advantage of poor worshipers, He overturned the moneychangers' tables and drove out the animals that were being sold. The inflamed priests demanded a sign (a miracle) to prove that He had the authority to purify the Temple, overriding their authority. Jesus said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). The priests could not believe their ears. They replied, “Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?” The temple of Jesus'

day had taken a generation to build, at enormous expense and countless man-hours. Even with all the workmen in the world, how could it be rebuilt in three days' time?

The disciples themselves did not understand at the time, either, but they did understand after the Resurrection:

But he spake of the temple of his body.

When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said (John 2:21-22).

Just as importantly, if not more so, the priests remembered as well; and that is why they took so much trouble to secure His body after His death. Matthew 27:62-66 tells of their understanding of His words:

Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate,

Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.

Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.

Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can.

So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.

They knew what He had said, knew what He had meant, and wanted to prevent anyone from allegedly bringing it to pass. They set a contingent of guards; they rolled a huge boulder in front of the opening to the tomb; and they sealed the boulder in place. *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they knew of His promise to leave the tomb and they could not prevent it.*

Next week, we will examine three direct evidences of the Resurrection as well as one indirect but powerful reason. We will also examine the reactions of the skeptics in the face of irrefutable evidence. For today, it is enough to know that

- *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they examined His claims and could not refute them;*
- *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they examined His life and could not find fault; and*
- *The skeptics give us strong evidence because they knew of His promise to leave the tomb and they could not prevent it.*

I close by repeating the words of Ravi Zacharias:

Was Jesus implying that belief is nothing more than a blind commitment of the will? I think not. But He did say, in effect, that *if you test His claims by the same measure that you legitimately substantiate other facts, you will find Him and His teaching thoroughly trustworthy* [emphasis mine].