



From Atheist to Theist (Part 42)

The Gift

By

Mark McGee

We are coming close to the end of a series I started more than twelve years ago. Here's how it began:

So, you don't believe there's a God. I understand. I didn't believe in God either, until May of 1971. Most atheists I've talked with about the existence of God during the last 40 years have expressed their concern for me in one way or another. Some have asked if I was ill and on heavy medication at the time of my conversion. Others said I must have been a very poor atheist because good atheists don't believe in God. I was not ill or on medication at the time and people who knew me said I was a "good" atheist. Something happened that led me to look at various arguments for the existence of God, and once I looked I found something I had never seen before.

The Gift

I became a Christian on Monday, May 10th, 1971, at 6:35pm. I remember it so well because of the events that led up to that day and time. It was the first day of the work week. I was on my way home from work and stopped by the office of Terry Lytle. I had been meeting with Terry and Dr. Ed Hindson for months to talk about evidence for the existence of God, the credibility of the Bible, and the reality of the life of Jesus Christ.

May 10th, 1971, was a month after Easter Sunday that year. We had talked about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ during that time. Something that stuck in my mind was what Terry and Ed had read to me from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians. I had already determined that the letter was legitimate based on the textual and historical evidence, so I listened with interest.

Some of the people at the church in Corinth said there was no resurrection of the dead. I found that interesting. Why would Christians living just a couple of decades after the supposed resurrection of Jesus not believe in the resurrection? Paul wrote them that if there was no resurrection of the dead, then Jesus didn't rise from the dead. He went on to write that if Jesus Christ was not risen, then his (Paul's) preaching was in vain and their faith was also in vain.

I found that a very powerful way to prove Christianity was false, especially when it was written by the man who was the chief persecutor of Christians when he didn't believe in Jesus' resurrection. Paul knew that Jesus had died, but he didn't believe He was alive .. until the living Jesus personally revealed Himself to Paul. It was that revelation of a resurrected Jesus that revolutionized Paul's life and his life's work.

What I read in 1 Corinthians 15 was an unexpected **gift**. I had been looking for a way to prove that Christianity was false, and it was as if Paul had handed me the key to destroying Christianity, which he had famously tried to do many years earlier. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity was a false belief. Even though I had found solid evidence to believe in the existence of God, the credibility of the Bible and the reality of the life and death of Jesus, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then the core belief of Christianity was false. Amazing! Why would Paul write that when it handed opponents of Christianity the most powerful way to bring the young belief system to its knees?

Paul, I learned, wrote what he wrote because he knew that Jesus was alive. Paul was concerned that some Christians in Corinth were questioning whether the resurrection of the human body was real, but Paul was not personally concerned whether physical resurrection was real. He was not concerned because he had seen the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth with his own eyes: "Then last of all He was seen by me also" (1 Corinthians 15:8). Seeing something with your

own eyes is a powerful piece of evidence that something is true, even if that something is difficult to believe.

I might add that Paul saw the resurrected Jesus on many occasions. Even though some of my atheist friends say Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was a one-time hallucination, they need to read deeper into what Paul revealed about his experience. Paul spent a period of time in Arabia between his conversion and meeting the apostles in Jerusalem.

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Galatians 1:15-17

We don't know how long Paul was in Arabia, but his next words in Galatians 1 were that "after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days" (Galatians 1:18). We also know that Paul was caught up to Paradise fourteen years before he wrote 2 Corinthians. Paul didn't know if he was in the body or out of the body, "God knows," but Paul did know he saw Paradise "and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." Paul had such an abundance of revelations while he was in Paradise that God placed a thorn in Paul's flesh "lest I be exalted above measure." (2 Corinthians 12:1-7)

When we do the math we find that Paul's revelations in Paradise happened before Barnabas invited Paul to join him in ministering as a teacher at the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). That was before Paul's first missionary journey and before he began writing to the churches.

Paul was convinced because of what he saw. Paul saw the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Paul heard His voice and conversed with Jesus. Paul saw Paradise and heard “inexpressible words.” Paul knew what was true because he saw it with his own eyes .. not just once, but many, many times.

The Challenge

Christianity, as explained to me, was based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I was already convinced by ancient non-Christian writings that Jesus was a real person who lived in Judea during the early part of the 1st century AD and had been crucified by the Romans. However, what I wasn't convinced of was that Jesus supernaturally rose from the dead. It wasn't a big deal to believe that a man lived in Judea and was killed by Romans because thousands of people were killed by Roman soldiers every year in those days. However, what was a big deal was to believe that a man rose from the dead after being brutally killed on a cross and buried in a tomb for three days. That just doesn't happen in the natural world, which is the only world an atheist can accept as being real.

What I found both intriguing and powerful was that the chief spokesperson for Christianity wrote that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, his preaching was in vain and so was the belief of every Christian. I thought about that a lot because it seemed like the best way to prove that Christianity was not true. After months of researching the Bible, the man who wrote the most writings in the Bible showed me a way to prove he and every other Christian was wrong. Paul had gone so far in 1 Corinthians 15 to write that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, he (Paul) was a false witness of God. Paul was actually putting himself out there as a possible liar and gave people like me a way to prove it.

Could I do that? Could I prove that Jesus didn't rise from the dead? Could I prove that Paul was in fact a liar, a false witness? It shouldn't be that hard, I thought, because people don't rise from the dead. Paul had to be lying. What evidence could he possibly present that would lead me to think otherwise?

The Evidence

The evidence Paul presented was fairly simple and straightforward. Here's how he wrote it —

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8

Paul began by referring to what he called “the gospel,” which I learned means “good news.” He wrote the Corinthians that he preached it to them and they received it. Paul also wrote that they stood in it and are saved by it, if they hold fast the word he had preached to them, unless they believed in vain.

I remembered reading that Jesus had called what He preached “the gospel” and that it included repenting from sin and turning to Him. Jesus presented Himself as having come from God with “the gospel of the kingdom.” Jesus was His own evidence with His miracles and healings and teachings. What evidence would Paul present?

Paul wrote that he “delivered” to the Corinthians what he had also “received.” Paul was apparently claiming that the evidence he was about to present was not something he had come up with, but had come from others.

1. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
2. He was buried
3. He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures

4. He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve, then by more than five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present even though some had died. He was seen by James, then by all the apostles, then by Paul.

What Paul had written was a simple way of understanding evidence:

1. Jesus died
2. Jesus was buried
3. Jesus rose
4. Jesus was seen

That Jesus had died on the Cross and was buried seemed to have plenty of evidence. What was in question was the resurrection. What could possibly prove that it was true?

Next Time

Paul placed everything on Jesus being seen by hundreds of people after He rose from the dead. Many of the people Paul mentioned were witnesses of the Romans killing Jesus and of Jesus being buried in a borrowed tomb. Were the eyewitnesses Paul mentioned strong enough evidence to something supernatural like the resurrection of a man from the dead? We will look into that in the next part of our special series, *From Atheist to Theist*.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®.
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission.
All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2026, Mark McGee and GraceLife