



From Atheist to Theist (Part 43)

False Worldview?

By

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Investigative journalism is boring and exciting. How so? The process is tedious, even laborious, as we work our way through mounds of documents, images, audio, video, phone and in-person interviews, etc. It can be boring, but absolutely necessary to make sure we find the truth. The outcome is rewarding. Once we see how all the pieces fit together and the truth of a story reveals itself, we know that the hard work will pay off. That's the exciting part.

False Worldview?

I knew I was getting close to the truth when I heard the words of 1 Corinthians 15 read to me. The Apostle Paul had handed me the best way to prove Christianity was a false worldview and he was a false witness.

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

See how easy that is? If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Paul was a false witness, his preaching was empty, believers' faith is empty and they should be pitied for their foolishness (my words). After four months of investigating the truth claims of Christianity, I had finally found the best way to prove its falsity. The best part? The leading apostle of Christianity had handed it to me on a silver platter! All I had to do was prove that Jesus had not risen from the dead? How hard could that be? Even Christians who were alive just a couple of decades after Jesus died didn't believe in the resurrection. However, the task of proving Jesus had not risen from the dead ran into a problem – witnesses to His resurrection – hundreds of them.

Hundreds of Witnesses

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 15:3-8

Paul started the section about the resurrection by listing the names of people who said they had seen Jesus of Nazareth alive after His death on the Roman cross. It was like a who's who of the New Testament:

- Cephas
- The Twelve
- More than 500 people at the same time

- James
- All the apostles
- Paul the Apostle

Cephas

The list of “seen by” witnesses began with someone named Cephas. We see that name mentioned six times in the New Testament: John 1:42; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Galatians 2:9. As we see in John 1, Cephas was the Apostle Peter.

One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, 'You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas' (which is translated, A Stone). John 1:40-42

Simon was his Hebrew name. Peter comes from the Greek word *petros*, which means “rock.” Cephas is Aramaic for “rock” or “stone.” He was Andrew’s brother. Paul used the name Cephas five of the six times it’s found in the New Testament. Paul also used Peter as well, as did the other writers of the New Testament.

Paul’s listing of Cephas (Peter) being the first resurrection witness is interesting. It might have been because of how some Corinthians preferred Peter’s apostleship (1 Corinthians 1:12). It might have been because Peter was so well known for his denial of Jesus during His trial, followed by his powerful sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter’s support of Paul for ministry to Gentiles, or for some other reason we don’t know.

Peter and John were among the first disciples of Jesus to see that His body was not in the tomb. Some of Jesus’ female followers had also seen the empty tomb and spoken with angels who told them Jesus had risen from the dead.

Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.

John 20:3-10

Luke mentions that Jesus appeared to two of His disciples on the same day. Luke's narrative flowed from Peter seeing inside the empty tomb to "two of them" meeting Jesus on the Road to Emmaus:

But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened. Now behold, two of them were traveling that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was seven miles from Jerusalem. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him. Luke 24:12-16

The disciples eventually realized they were with Jesus, but He vanished from their sight:

Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, 'Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?' So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, 'The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!' And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and

how He was known to them in the breaking of bread.

Luke 24:31-35

We do not know the names of the two disciples who had seen the resurrected Jesus, but we know they returned to Jerusalem and told the Eleven (the apostles minus Judas Iscariot) “and those who were with them” that they had seen Jesus and He was risen from the dead. They also mentioned that Jesus “has appeared to Simon.” Several Simons are mentioned in the New Testament, but it’s interesting that the two disciples from Emmaus thought it important enough to mention that Jesus had appeared to “Simon.” Might they have meant Simon Peter? If it was, the meeting was a private conversation that Peter did not mention in his letters or his account of his time with Jesus as told to Mark (Gospel of Mark). If it was another Simon, why would the Emmaus disciples make that a primary point of their declaration?

Peter – Changed Life

Peter (Cephas) was a powerful eyewitness. He denied Jesus three times after His arrest, denials Jesus had told Peter would happen.

Then he began to curse and swear, *saying*, ‘I do not know the Man!’ Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ So he went out and wept bitterly. Matthew 26:74-75

Peter went into hiding. It was not until he saw Jesus raised from the dead that Peter came out of hiding. Peter went on to become the leader of the apostles and preach a powerful sermon in the streets of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Peter was a changed man. Why? Because he had seen with his own eyes that Jesus had risen from the dead. Peter continued preaching the Gospel of the risen Christ until the day he was martyred.

The Twelve

The phrase “The Twelve” was used to describe the twelve men Jesus had chosen to speak for Him and lead His Church (Matthew 10:2-4). The Twelve included Judas Iscariot until Judas betrayed Jesus and killed himself (Matthew 27:5). The Twelve would later include Matthias who became the replacement for Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:6). Matthias may have been among those who were with the Eleven when the Emmaus disciples told them about seeing the risen Jesus.

Even as the two men from Emmaus were telling the apostles about their meeting, Jesus appeared to them.

Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, ‘Peace to you.’ But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, “Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” Luke 24:36-39

Thomas, one of the apostles, was not with the group when Jesus appeared to them. Some of the apostles told Thomas about seeing and talking with the risen Jesus, but Thomas said:

Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe. John 20:25

Jesus did appear to Thomas eight days later:

Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.' And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. John 20:26

According to the New Testament, the apostles saw Jesus in person many times after the resurrection. The New Testament includes several of those occasions, but we don't know if all of them are listed. We do know that Jesus taught them from the Scriptures about Himself and "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" over a period of forty days (Luke 24:44-45; Acts 1:1-3).

Paul's declaration that Cephas and the Twelve saw the risen Jesus has support from all of the Gospel accounts and Acts. The Apostle John also attested to that in his first letter (1 John 1:1-4).

The Twelve – Changed Lives

Seeing Jesus alive after His death changed the lives of the apostles dramatically. Just like Peter, most of the apostles went into hiding after Jesus' arrest.

Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled. Matthew 26:56

The only apostle who came out of hiding was John. He stood near the cross and saw Jesus die.

Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home. John 19:25-27

We see the apostles come out of hiding and become powerful preachers of the Gospel after they spent 40 days with Jesus after His resurrection. That change among all of the apostles (except Judas Iscariot) impressed me as an atheist. The change was so dramatic that they were all willing to be arrested, jailed, beaten and even killed for their belief in the resurrection of Christ (Acts chapters 4 and 5). Why would men go from being in hiding for fear of being arrested and killed to being unafraid and open with their belief in a risen Jesus? I took note of that and it played a role in my eventual belief in the resurrection.

Next Time

So far, we have at least 15 people who saw Jesus alive on the third day after He died on a Roman cross (e.g. women at the tomb, ten of the apostles [Thomas eight days later], other people with the apostles, and two Emmaus disciples). That's a good number of witnesses for an investigation, but there were more – many more.

What about Paul's claim that more than 500 people saw the resurrected Jesus at the same time? Any evidence for that being true? We will look at that in the next part of our special series, *From Atheist to Theist*.

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