



From Atheist to Theist (Part 44)

Eyewitnesses to the Risen Christ

By

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I became convinced as an atheist that God exists. How does that happen? In my case it happened because I investigated the truth claims of Christianity over a period of several months and found them to be true.

Hundreds of Eyewitnesses

One of the most powerful truth claims of Christianity is that hundreds of people saw Jesus of Nazareth alive after His resurrection from the dead. Hundreds. Let that sink in for a minute. Not one. Not two. Not ten. Hundreds of eyewitnesses.

In the last part of this study we saw the first 15 eyewitnesses the Apostle Paul mentioned in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. They included the women who saw Jesus alive near His empty tomb and men who were among His closest followers.

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. 1 Corinthians
15:3-6

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians sometime between 53 and 55 AD while he was ministering in Ephesus. That would have been about 25 years after Jesus' resurrection, which would explain why Paul would write that the "greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep." Paul was making a truth claim that most of the people who witnessed Jesus being alive after His crucifixion were still alive. Some had died, which would be natural over a period of 25 years, but most would still be alive. Anyone with doubts to the accuracy of that statement could have traveled to Judea and talked with hundreds of the eyewitnesses who were still alive.

How would Paul know that most of the people who were part of the big crowd that saw Jesus were still alive? Keep in mind that Paul did his own investigation into the truth claims about Christianity. Paul talked with Jesus on the road to Damascus and knew He was alive. Paul also spent time in Arabia, possibly studying with Jesus, and later met with the apostles thanks to Barnabas (Acts 9:26-28). Paul also spent 15 days with the Apostle Peter (Galatians 1:18). That must have been a fascinating opportunity for Paul to learn about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from one of the Lord's inner circle of disciples. Peter would have been one of the more than 500 people who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection. Peter could have told Paul that most of the eyewitnesses were still alive. Paul also visited the brethren in Jerusalem on other occasions prior to writing 1 Corinthians 15 and may have met many of the people who had been part of that large crowd of more than 500 people. Paul had many ways of confirming that what he said in 1 Corinthians 15 was true.

Investigative Clues

As an investigator I wondered what other evidence might support Paul's claim about more than 500 'brethren at once' seeing Jesus alive. I could see that Paul may have confirmed it personally with many of the people who were in attendance, but where else might I find more support in the New Testament record?

One of the first clues to when Jesus might have appeared to hundreds of people at the same time is something He said to female disciples He met after His resurrection:

And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, 'Rejoice!' So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.' Matthew 28:9-10

One of the angels in the empty tomb told the women the same thing:

But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.’

Mark 16:6-7

It’s clear that Jesus wanted His disciples to meet Him in Galilee, but was Galilee the first time they saw Him? Galilee was about 80 miles north of Jerusalem, so it would have taken the disciples two or three days to get there by foot. Is that what the disciples did? Did they all leave Jerusalem on the same day as the Resurrection and travel to Galilee?

Clues are like breadcrumbs to an investigator. They may seem small and insignificant at first, but they grow in importance as we follow them to where they lead. We’ve already seen that Jesus showed Himself alive to female disciples on the same day He rose from the dead. Did anyone else see Him that same day? If so, where were they?

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 ... 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 24:13-16, 32-35

Emmaus was located about seven miles west of Jerusalem. Two of the disciples were walking to Emmaus when Jesus appeared to them. They didn't recognize Him at first. Here's how the conversation unfolded:

And He said to them, 'What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?' Then the one whose name was Cleopas answered and said to Him, 'Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?' And He said to them, 'What things?' So they said to Him, 'The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also

seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.' Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Then they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther. But they constrained Him, saying, 'Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.' And He went in to stay with them. Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight.

Luke 24:17-31

We know from the conversation that it took place on the same day Jesus rose from the dead – ‘today is the third day since these things happened.’ We also know that the two disciples had been with the other disciples when women came from the empty tomb to tell them that angels told them Jesus was alive. The two disciples also confirmed that some of the disciples who were with them went to the tomb and found it just as they had said, but they didn’t see Jesus there – ‘certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.’

We know that it was 'toward evening, and the day is far spent' when they invited Jesus to stay with them. That means it would have been evening, or even later that same day, when they 'rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem.' The words 'returned to Jerusalem' are another confirmation of where they had been earlier that day. They would have met with the other disciples in the 'evening' when they told them Jesus had appeared to Simon and about the things Jesus had told them as they were eating together.

So, did the other disciples get up that evening to travel to Galilee to meet with Jesus? They did not. Here's why I say that.

Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. John 20:19-20

Jesus came to the disciples who were in Jerusalem that same evening. He showed them His hands and His side and the disciples believed He was alive and were glad. All except for one. Thomas was not there that evening. The disciples later told Thomas they had 'seen the Lord' (John 20:25a). Thomas said he would not believe them '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' (John 20:25b).

It would be another week (eight days) before Thomas saw Jesus alive from the dead.

And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. 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! John 20:26-28

Just like eight days earlier, the disciples were inside a building (possibly the same one) with the doors shut. Jesus stood in their midst even though the doors were shut, just like the first time. Jesus greeted all of the disciples ('Peace to you'), then addressed Thomas directly. Thomas had said he would not believe that Jesus was alive unless he saw 'in His hands the print of the nails' and placed his 'finger into the print of the nails' and put his hand 'into His side.' Jesus knew what Thomas had said to the other apostles, so He invited Thomas to 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side.' Thomas' response was to proclaim, 'My Lord and my God!'

Next Time

Following the clues has brought us to eight days since Jesus rose from the dead. The disciples are apparently still in Jerusalem. The eleventh apostle, Thomas, has just seen direct evidence that Jesus was alive from the dead (remember that Judas Iscariot had committed suicide). When did the 'Eleven' go to Galilee? When did more than 500 people see Jesus alive at the same time? We will look at more clues in the next part of our special series, From Atheist to Theist.

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