

From Atheist to Theist (Part 45)

Proof of Life

By

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> Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. Matthew 28:16-17

One of the benefits of having four Gospels in the New Testament is being able to get a full report about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Three of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – are "synoptic." That means they describe events from a similar viewpoint. It doesn't mean they are identical, but they address many of the same events. The word "synoptic" comes from a Latin word (synopticus) which means "seen together, seeing all together." The Gospel of John is not synoptic because it describes events from a different viewpoint. Having the four Gospels gives us an excellent perspective for understanding the ministry of Christ on earth.

Proof of Life

The Gospels are documents that serve as a “proof of life” for Jesus Christ. The writings of the apostles, who knew Jesus personally, are also proof-of-life documents. The Apostle Paul presented three types of that proof (evidence) in 1 Corinthians 15:

The gospel ‘which I preached to you:’

- Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
- He was buried
- He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures
- He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve .. He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present .. He was seen by James, then by all the apostles .. He was seen by me also

This is a very powerful and convincing proof-of-life defense. Paul presented his argument in the typical logical and legal style of his time:

- Claim – 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures'
- Supporting Evidence – 'He was buried'
- Claim – 'He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures
- Supporting Evidence – He was seen by Cephas, the Twelve, by more than 500 people at once, by James, by all the apostles, then by Paul himself

Paul's claims and supporting evidence are found in the Gospels. Paul investigated the claims and discovered the supporting evidence as he talked with many of Christ's followers who had seen Him dead, buried, and risen.

More than 500 at once?

One of the more controversial claims Paul made is that more than 500 people saw Jesus alive after the resurrection – at the same time. Where is that supporting evidence in the Gospels? It's in several places:

> But the angel answered and said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.' So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. Matthew 28:5-8

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

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. Matthew 28:16-17

After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together .. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. John 21:1-2, 14

Let's first do some observation to understand how these verses are evidence supporting Paul's claim. Jesus died outside the city of Jerusalem. Jesus was buried near Jerusalem. Jesus rose from His burial place near Jerusalem. An angel spoke to women at the burial place near Jerusalem telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead. Jesus spoke to women near the grave where He rose from the dead – near Jerusalem. Jesus appeared to disciples who were walking along a road to the village of Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem, on the same day that He rose from the dead (Luke 24:13-31). He appeared that same day to more of His disciples who were hiding in a house in Jerusalem (Luke 24:32-43). Jesus appeared to His disciples in Jerusalem eight days later to prove to Thomas that He was alive. Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus came to them the first time. Jesus showed Thomas proof of His resurrection and Thomas famously said – "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:24-29). Jesus appeared a third time to the disciples, but they were many miles north of Jerusalem near the Sea of Tiberias (Sea of Galilee).

Jesus most likely appeared to more than 500 people at the same time when He met the disciples in Galilee. The angel told the women that they would see Jesus in Galilee. Jesus told the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to see Him. Jesus saw some of the disciples first in and near Jerusalem, but later saw more of them in Galilee.

Two more important clues are that the disciples met Jesus at 'the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them,' and that while some of the disciples worshipped Him, some doubted. The 'mountain' in Galilee was most likely the same place along the sea where Jesus had spoken to His disciples in the past. Much of the Lord's early ministry was in Galilee. Jesus was raised in Galilee (Nazareth) and established a type of headquarters in Galilee. Many of His disciples lived in Galilee and would have known where to go when they received word that the risen Jesus was going to meet with them.

The ‘Eleven’ would have had no doubts about Jesus by that time. They had all seen and talked with Jesus and were convinced He had a physical body that had been dead, but was raised to life. The disciples who ‘doubted’ may have been those living in Galilee when Jesus rose. Imagine standing with a crowd of more than 500 people on the side of mountain looking at someone you knew the Romans had killed. While some believed and worshipped Jesus, some doubted. I think that’s understandable under the circumstances. They may have come to believe later, but their initial reaction was doubt.

We know that Jesus ascended to Heaven ‘from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath days’s journey’ (Acts 1:12). We also know that the angels said this to the disciples who watched Jesus ascend from Mt. Olivet – ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.’ So, what we have is a group of Galileans standing on Mt. Olivet watching Jesus ascend to Heaven. We also know that these people included male and female disciples, along with

Mary, the mother of Jesus, and His brothers (Acts 1:13-14). They returned to Jerusalem and entered the upper room where they were staying. The number of people in the group ‘was about a hundred and twenty’ (Acts 1:15).

What Happened to the Witnesses?

Based on the list of people who saw Jesus alive after His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6-8), only 20% were in the group that went from the ‘mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem,’ entered into ‘the upper room where they were staying.’ What happened to the rest of disciples who saw Jesus alive in Galilee? About 400 of those people did not see Jesus ascend into Heaven or go into Jerusalem to receive power ‘when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’ (Acts 1:8). Why weren’t they there?

Some of the disciples ‘doubted’ when they saw Jesus alive after the resurrection. That doubt may have kept them from traveling from Galilee into Jerusalem. The fact that the Roman and Jewish authorities had Jesus killed and might still be hunting for His disciples, could have kept some of Christ’s followers from leaving the relative safety of their homes in Galilee to travel to the potential danger lurking in Jerusalem. Some of the disciples in Galilee may have ventured into Jerusalem for the annual Feast of Pentecost, but kept their distance because of doubts or fears. Some of those disciples

at Pentecost may have heard Peter's sermon in the streets of Jerusalem and joined more than two thousand others that day who may have 'gladly received his word and were baptized' (Acts 2:40). They may have been among the three thousand souls who were 'added to them' that day.

Luke wrote – 'And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). It may be that some of the disciples in Galilee joined with the apostles and other believers at a later time. Acts 9:31-32 tells us that 'the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.' That is evidence that there were believers in all parts of Israel meeting together to worship Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We know that Saul of Tarsus tried to destroy churches and imprison believers until Jesus changed his life. Saul traveled all the way from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria to accomplish his goal, so he would have probably traveled through Galilee looking for believers to arrest and throw in prison. However, after Saul's (Paul's) conversion and eventual return to Tarsus, the number of believers in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had

peace, were edified, comforted by the Holy Spirit, and multiplied in number.

Paul's evidential claims in 1 Corinthians 15 are supported by the Gospels and Book of Acts.

Next Time

Please join me in the next *From Atheist to Theist* newsletter as I finish explaining why I converted from atheism to Christianity.

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