

# THE RESURRECTION AND YOU

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# A Personal Journey

## *What Happened When I Set Out to Disprove Christianity*

JOSH MCDOWELL

**A**s a student at Kellogg College, I was preparing to go to law school and eventually into politics. Out of the entire student body there was one group of students whose lives were different, and they caught my attention. Rather than living for money, success, or fame, these students authentically loved each other. I came from a broken family, having been raped by our farmhand, Wayne Baily, every week for seven years. So I desperately wanted the kind of love they seemed to genuinely experience and display. Their

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love for all people, both inside and outside of their group, was weird to me. But I *desperately* wanted it.

But I was also an insecure skeptic with a big mouth. I didn't want them to know the hurt and pain that were deep in my heart. And I didn't want them to know how deeply I was seeking meaning and purpose in my life. Hoping to discover their secret, I befriended them. One day, as we sat around a table in the student union, I asked a girl in the group why she was so different from other students and professors on campus. I tried to pretend that it wasn't a big deal to me, but I *really* wanted to know. With a little smile, she looked back at me and said two words I never thought I would hear on campus as part of the answer. She simply said, "Jesus Christ."

Instantly I shot back, "Don't give me that garbage about religion. I'm fed up with religion, the church, and the Bible." This girl had a lot of conviction, because she shot right back at me, "Mister, I did not tell you religion. I told you the person of Jesus Christ." My intention was not to be rude, so I apologized for my outburst. But I thought Christians were losers and I was sick and tired of religion. How could someone who died two thousand years ago have any relevance for my life today?

To my surprise, the group challenged me to intellectually consider the claims of Christ. They actually dared me to examine the historical evidence for the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection of Jesus. I honestly

thought it was a joke! And I was determined to prove them wrong. So I left college and, using money I had saved up from a successful painting business, traveled throughout the United States, England, and the Middle East to gather the evidence disproving Christianity. Today, much of this evidence can be found in books, at local libraries, and on the internet. But in the 1950s it could only be seen firsthand at libraries and universities around the world. I set out to make an intellectual joke of Christianity. What I discovered turned my life upside down.

Late one Friday afternoon, I was sitting alone in a library in London, England, weary after spending many months researching. Suddenly I heard something like a voice speak to me. I don't normally hear voices, so this was shocking and very unsettling. The voice said, *Josh, you don't have a leg to stand on.* I immediately suppressed it. After all, I was aiming to *disprove* Christianity, not believe it. Interestingly, almost every single day after that, I heard the same voice, but louder, and louder, and louder! The more I examined the evidence, the more it took me to the opposite conclusion of what I aimed to reach.

My goal was to disprove Christianity, but my research led me to the conclusion that I could trust the Bible, that Jesus is God, and that he was raised from the dead on the third day.

Even though I knew it was all true, at first I resisted committing my life to following Jesus. I was afraid of what people would think of me and of the cost of becoming a

believer. But now, after five decades of following Christ, I can wholeheartedly say that it was the best decision of my life. The evidence got my attention, but it was the love of God, which I saw on display in the lives of those college students at the start of my journey, that ultimately captured my heart.

*The Resurrection and You* is a book that my son, Sean, and I worked on together. If you are a believer, we hope that this will provide you with some evidence to see that your faith is well grounded. If you agree, would you consider sharing this book with a non-Christian friend?

If you are a skeptic, all we ask is that you read this with an open mind. If Jesus really rose from the dead, confirming that he is God (Rom. 1:4), then there is nothing more important in life than following him. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then you have nothing to lose—it's all just a bad joke.

No one has changed the world more than Jesus Christ. And he is still in the business of changing lives today. Now, let's consider the evidence for the resurrection and what it means for *your* life.

# 1

## Why the Resurrection Matters

### *The World's Only Hope*

Consider this comment a girl posted on an atheist website:

I'm confused . . . I always believed science would be the cure-all for my problems, but I don't know if I can keep living without eternal life. I guess I'll just have to find a way myself to make it through this meaningless existence. I just wish I knew of someone who could show me the path to eternal life. If science can't provide the answers, though, then who or what can!? \*sigh\* Doesn't it seem like there is a higher power that gives our lives purpose? Well, science says there isn't, so there isn't.<sup>1</sup>

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Have you ever felt like this girl? Can you relate to her angst? Have you ever really wondered, in an atheistic universe, if there is any point at all? Even Bertrand Russell, the great and influential philosopher, realized that an atheistic universe is truly meaningless.<sup>2</sup>

Hope is in short supply in our culture these days. If life as one sees it now on this pain-filled planet is all there is, then existence is indeed meaningless and one must, as this girl says, “find a way myself.” She realizes there is one thing that would make everything meaningful: *eternal life*. She once expected science to find a way for humans to live forever, but she has come to realize that it cannot.

At one point in history, there was a band of people who trusted in someone they fervently believed would truly change the world for good. A handful of devout Jewish people thought a man named Jesus was the Messiah—the deliverer who would break their oppressive bondage under the Romans and set up a permanent and truly godly kingdom on earth. Their prophet Isaiah had prophesied in the ancient Jewish writings that the Messiah would come and restore all things to a paradise, where there would be no more fighting, oppression, fear, or death (Isa. 11; 35). Everyone would live together in peace forever.

Imagine the terrible mental and emotional state of that small group of followers as they stood watching the Messiah, their deliverer, breathing his last agonized breath, hung to die as a common criminal on a Roman cross. They had given up everything to follow him. But now here he

was, nailed up on a cross. Dying! And dying with him were all the hopes they had placed in him. They must have felt like the girl we quoted above. Life seemed meaningless. Everything was hopeless. There seemed to be no way out of their absurd existence, no pathway to an ideal, eternal life.

Mary Magdalene was one of those followers of Jesus the Messiah. She supported his ministry financially and believed he was the one whom God had chosen to bring eternal peace to the world. She stood near the cross and witnessed the cruel execution of her master, and now her life was in utter turmoil.

After the Roman soldiers determined that Jesus was dead, they took him down from the cross and gave his body to a wealthy Jewish official to be buried in a new tomb. Mary left the dismal scene determined to visit his tomb after the burial was completed. Early Sunday morning she went to the tomb, and there she experienced another setback. Not only had Jesus been unjustly killed but also, to her alarm, the tomb was open and his body was gone. Fearing that someone had stolen the body, she ran to Peter and John, two of Jesus' followers, telling them what she had seen. In utter disbelief, the two men quickly ran to the tomb to check out her story for themselves.

When they arrived, they saw the collapsed shell of the graveclothes still intact, but the body was nowhere to be found. Frightened and confused, the two disciples returned home. But Mary lingered behind. She peered back in the

tomb for one last look, and what she saw startled her: two men, robed in bright white, sat inside the tomb.

“Why are you crying?” the angels asked her.

“Because they have taken away my Lord,” she replied, “and I don’t know where they have put him” (John 20:13).

Turning around, she then saw something even more remarkable: Jesus was standing right before her, alive! But strangely, rather than recognizing him, she mistook him for a gardener. Jesus asked her the same question the angels had asked:

“Dear woman, why are you crying?”

Still clueless as to whom she was speaking, she said softly, “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him” (v. 15).

But then in a moment of remarkable tenderness Jesus called her by name: “Mary!” he said.

“Teacher!” she cried as she suddenly recognized him (v. 16).

Jesus stood before Mary alive, healthy, and well because death could not hold the promised Messiah. God had resurrected him to fulfill his mission and bring eternal life to a sick and dying world.

## **Our Resurrection Hope**

When Christ was on the cross, it seemed that all had been lost. Death had won. But after three days in a rich man’s

tomb, Jesus appeared alive again. The news was so shocking that his followers refused to believe it until he presented himself to them physically and invited them to see the nail marks in his hands and feet with their own eyes. Then Jesus made an amazing claim to his disciples: in the future they too would have resurrected bodies like his, bodies that would never deteriorate, age, or perish. They would realize the one great hope that would bring meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence. They would have new life without death or pain in the presence of a loving God forever.

That is the great hope Christianity offers to a hopeless world—an afterlife with God, free of pain and suffering, and filled with boundless joy. Despite what many critics claim, belief in the resurrection does not make us “no earthly good.” In reality, it gives us hope for the future and impacts how we treat both people and creation in the present. This belief in eternal life is not a mere pie-in-the-sky idea designed to make us feel good in a hopeless world; it is a belief built on rock-solid evidence. We will explore the overwhelming evidence in this booklet.

## **The Vital Importance of the Resurrection**

The historical fact of the resurrection is the very foundation of the Christian faith. It is not an optional article of faith—it is *the* faith! The resurrection of Jesus Christ and

Christianity stand or fall together. One cannot be true without the other. Belief in the truth of Christianity is not merely faith in faith—ours or someone else’s—but rather faith in the risen Christ of history. Without the historical resurrection of Jesus, the Christian faith is a mere placebo. Without the literal, physical resurrection, we might as well forget God, church, and following moral rules. We might as well just “feast and drink, for tomorrow we die!” (1 Cor. 15:32).

On the other hand, if Christ has been raised from the dead, then he is alive at this very moment (1 Cor. 15:4), and we can know him personally. Our sins are forgiven (v. 3), and he has broken the power of death (v. 54). Furthermore, he promises that we too will be resurrected someday (v. 22). We can trust him because he is sovereign over the world (v. 27). He will give us ultimate victory (v. 57) and a meaningful life (v. 58).

British scholar N. T. Wright explains how central the resurrection has been in the life of the church:

There is no form of early Christianity known to us—though there are some that have been invented by ingenious scholars—that does not affirm at its heart that after Jesus’ shameful death God raised him to life again. Already by the time of Paul, our earliest written records, the resurrection of Jesus is not just a single detached article of faith. It is woven into the very structure of Christian life and thought.<sup>3</sup>

Although the resurrection of Jesus is much *more* than a historical fact, it is nothing *less* than one. We will show later that there is powerful, verified evidence that it really happened.

## **The Personal Meaning of the Resurrection**

### ***Freedom from the Fear of Death***

It is common for humans to fear death. Not only is it extremely difficult to imagine ceasing to exist, it is also terrifying.

Why, exactly, do we fear death? Let us suggest six reasons:<sup>4</sup>

1. Death is mysterious and unknown.
2. We have to face death alone.
3. We are separated from our loved ones.
4. Our personal hopes and dreams will not be realized.
5. Death raises the possibility that we will be annihilated.
6. Death is unavoidable.

While the Bible never promises complete deliverance from the emotionally difficult aspects of death, we are told that victory over the utterly paralyzing fear of it is within our grasp. Truly understanding the biblical doctrine of the

resurrection frees us from the debilitating fear of our final journey into the unknown realm.

The resurrection makes it clear that no matter how devastating our struggles, disappointments, and troubles are, they are only temporary. No matter what happens to you, no matter the depth of the tragedy or pain you face, no matter how death stalks you and your loved ones, the resurrection promises you a future of immeasurable good.

### ***Fulfillment of Our Hopes and Desires***

Science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov expressed the attitude many have about heaven when he wrote, “I don’t believe in the afterlife, so I don’t have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.”<sup>5</sup>

Sadly, a similar view of the afterlife is common even among Christians. Our vision of heaven is often limited to an extended, boring, uninspiring church service. Or many, influenced by cartoons and jokes, see it as a place where we will mosey about among clouds in long white gowns while strumming on harps. Somehow our image of heaven has become grotesquely distorted, and the prospect of life after death has not captured our imaginations or transformed our lives.

I (Sean) recently asked my students what they would do if they had only three days left to live before they died and

went to heaven. How would they spend those few remaining days? Answers included skydiving, traveling, surfing, and (of course) having sex. I followed up with a simple question: “So, you think there may be pleasures and experiences in this life that if you don’t do them before you die, you will miss out on altogether because they won’t exist in heaven?” All but two students answered yes. The prospect of heaven dismayed and disappointed them.

Such a lack of eternal perspective sets people up for discouragement and sin. Many of them think that if they don’t experience certain pleasures now, their chance will be gone and they never will experience them. They adopt this attitude because they carry in their minds a mistaken picture of what heaven is really like.

We have been taught too often to spiritualize the new heaven and the new earth with a nonphysical interpretation. Often when people call something spiritual, they mean it is nonphysical. This has caused a widespread misconception and has led to the idea that God’s physical creation is somehow inferior to truly spiritual things, including heaven. Many also believe that in heaven we will be spiritual, which to them means that we will be without solid, substantial, truly physical bodies. This view leads to an unbiblical division between the physical and spiritual, causing many to think that only the spiritual is good and that the physical is temporary, disposable, and even in some ways evil.

There are serious problems with such a view. People who believe this way tend to forget that at the end of each

day of the physical creation of the world, God pronounced his work to be good. Everything he made out of atoms and molecules, cells and dirt, he called “good.” The new heaven and the new earth can’t be merely spiritual (understood as nonphysical) because our physical bodies will be resurrected. A nonphysical resurrection is like a colorless rainbow. It’s a contradiction! When the apostle Paul describes our own resurrection, he says,

When the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies. Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” (1 Cor. 15:52–54)

Paul doesn’t tell us here that we will be bodiless spirits. Indeed, he tells us the opposite. We will have bodies—real bodies like those we have right now, but they will be immortal. They will no longer be subject to the ravages of disease, age, and death, and they will never die. They will be absolutely perfect in every detail, stunningly beautiful, immensely strong, utterly healthy, and impervious to aging and death.

The world we live in now offers us a glimpse of the joys and pleasures that we will experience when God brings

the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21). In his book *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn explains, “All our lives we’ve been dreaming of the New Earth. Whenever we see beauty in water, wind, flower, deer, man, woman, or child, we catch a glimpse of Heaven. Just like the Garden of Eden, the New Earth will be a place of sensory delight, breathtaking beauty, satisfying relationships, and personal joy.”<sup>6</sup> We will not live in a sterile environment or float about among endless clouds with nothing to do. We will live on an all-new earth—just like this one, except free from storms, earthquakes, drought, floods, or any other disasters. Things will grow easily, and weeds and thorns will not exist. Animals will not harm us but rather look to us benevolently as their leaders and benefactors.

We may not be able to picture everything about our resurrected existence on the new earth, but this we can be absolutely sure of: God created us for delight. He created the earth for our delight and pleasure. Whereas all pleasures are now tainted by human rebellion, he intends none of them to be lost. All that was created will be restored. Because he loves us so deeply, he wants us to experience all the delights he originally intended when he created us.