

Building our Faith The Sign of the Resurrection #7

Intro: The ultimate sign and proof of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus. In our lessons on the resurrection we have explored the facts the gospel writers give us concerning the death, burial, and the circumstances at the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week. And now we are looking at the capstone of the proof of the resurrection--the witnesses who saw Jesus alive after His crucifixion.

In our last three lessons we have looked at nine remarkable eye-witness accounts of the resurrection, Jesus' appearance to:

Mary Magdalene at the tomb

Other women near the tomb

Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus

Simon Peter

Ten of the apostles on the first day of the week

Eleven of the apostles eight days later

Seven of the apostles by the Sea of Galilee

More than five hundred brethren at one time (possibly in Galilee)

James, the Lord's brother

Each of these appearances is unique and has its own persuasive power to confirm the fact of the resurrection. But as we read the NT, we are able to see that even this does not exhaust the evidence God has given us for our faith in this most important truth. Let's consider today the final three post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Even after all these appearances Jesus also appeared to:

All the apostles

Details of the appearance

Paul, in enumerating the witnesses of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15, mentions multiple appearances to the apostles; but after relating the appearance to James he mentions a final appearance to the apostles. *"then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;" (1 Cor. 15:7, NASB)*

This is probably a reference to the Lord's final appearance to the apostles before His ascension. It is recorded both in Luke 24 and Ac. 1.

Before we look at it, it may be helpful to remember how Luke in Acts describes this post-resurrection period in the earthly life of Jesus: *"To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3-4, NASB)*

First notice the phrase "many convincing proofs." Luke uses a term found only here in the NT and which conveys the idea of what is revealed directly and not through witnesses. The idea here is that Jesus manifested himself directly to the apostles and not merely provided proof of His resurrection through others to them.

There were "many" such proofs occurring over a lengthy period of time, i.e. 40 days. This amount of time eliminates any concept of collective hysteria or hallucination or impulsive conclusions based a single event.

These "convincing proofs" culminate in His final appearance to them before His ascension to heaven. Luke reports it with great reserve:

“And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”” (Acts 1:6–11, NASB)

Observations about the appearance

By this time Jesus had appeared to many people over a lengthy period of time. There is here no reporting of doubt or uncertainty as in the earlier accounts. Jesus' resurrection is now a settled fact in the apostle's minds.

Jesus gives one final proof of who He is by ascending into the sky.

That itself is a confirmatory sign of who He is and is a verification of the promise the angels of God are about to make about him.

With the promise of the "two men" one might not expect that anyone would ever see Jesus again until His return at the end of the age. However, the Scriptures afford us three additional witnesses of the resurrected Lord, these occurring after Jesus' ascension.

Stephen

Details of the appearance

You remember that Stephen was one of the seven chosen to serve the widows in Jerusalem; but in addition he was a powerful advocate for the truth against the unbelieving Jews. When they could no longer withstand his arguments, they brought false charges against him and

brought him before the Jewish Council. It was here that Stephen delivered his appeal to the Jews not to harden their hearts like their forefathers. However they once more resisted the truth and sought to kill Stephen as a false prophet. But while they rushed to kill him, he was given a vision of the resurrected Lord.

“But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears, and they rushed upon him with one impulse.” (Acts 7:55–57, NASB)

Observations about the appearance

Though this appearance did not involve Jesus being on earth, he was visible to one who lived on earth; and it confirms that His ascension did indeed exalt him to heavenly glory and rule.

Certainly Stephen would have had no reason to invent such a vision, since it would have only further enflamed the anger of the opposing Jews.

However, so certain was he of the reality of the Lord, that he not only announced what he was seeing, but also spoke to the one he saw:

“And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” And having said this, he fell asleep.” (Acts 7:59–60, NASB)

Though Stephen is not usually appealed to as a witness of the resurrection, it seems appropriate that he should be included in the list of those who saw the Lord alive after His crucifixion.

And this appearance moves us into a new category of testimony, viz. those who saw Jesus after His ascension and in His heavenly glory. To Stephen we can also add:

The apostle Paul

Details of the appearance

The apostle Paul would likewise see the resurrected Lord in His heavenly glory. In the witness list of 1 Cor. 15 Paul writes:

and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Of course, here the reference is to the Lord's appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus.

Luke gives the historical account of this appearance to Paul:

“And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told

you what you must do." And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one." (Acts 9:3-7, NASB)

Later Paul would give his personal account of these encounters with Jesus:

His report is very similar to Luke's account. He makes clear that Jesus manifested himself in a bright light that was visible to the others and in sound that was audible to his companions; but that only he could understand the words that Jesus was speaking.

Observations about the appearance

When Paul says "last of all" he makes clear that when he talks about the resurrection, he is not talking about some spiritual experience that any and all believers might profess to receive. He is speaking of the real appearance of Jesus in his resurrected body.

This fact of course makes Paul's testimony so powerful.

How could we possibly explain the radical transformation that took place in him, from a violent persecutor of the church to one of the most zealous advocates for the gospel?

How could we explain the suffering that Paul would endure for that decision? Would he have chosen such a life unless he was absolutely persuaded that it was Jesus who had appeared to him.

And we should remember that this appearance would be one of several recorded personal appearances of Jesus to Paul over the course of his ministry:

In the temple at Jerusalem (Ac. 22:17-21)

At Corinth (Ac. 18:9-10)

During his imprisonment at Jerusalem (Ac. 23:11)

Possibly at his stoning in Lystra (2 Cor. 12:1-7).

And likely even on other occasions (Gal. 1:11, 12.)

How could Paul justifiably make such unique claims to others and be believed? The proof would be in the apostolic signs that Paul performed that made those claims credible (2 Cor. 12:12).

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians he could rightly claim that he was "last of all" to witness the resurrection; but we could in fact list one other witness that would see Jesus later.

The apostle John

Details of the appearance

John would be banished to the island of Patmos because of his testimony in preaching the gospel. He had seen Jesus alive after His resurrection and had for many years born witness to the facts of the gospel. But now Jesus wanted to reveal a message through him that the prophecies of Daniel about the complete victory of the kingdom of God over all world powers were about to be fulfilled in the destruction

of Jerusalem and in the defeat of the powers of the Rome Empire. Thus John writes:

“I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.” And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands;” (Rev. 1:9–12, NASB)

John sees this being of amazing glory standing there; and he is identified in this way:

And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.” (Rev. 1:17–18, NASB)

Is there any doubt that this is Jesus? Later he would speak:

I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star. (Rev. 22:16–17, NASB)

Thus it is called "the revelation of Jesus Christ." (Rev. 1:1).

Observations about the appearance

Again the appearance is compatible with the portrait the NT gives us of the Jesus in His resurrected glory.

The claim is that this is the living Lord who has power over death because of the resurrection and who rules from heaven over the kingdoms of men and over His kingdom.

Conclusion: What will you do with this impressive testimony God has given us? Have you believed the testimony of the resurrection? This is the word of faith Paul preached:

that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)

Have you confessed Jesus as Lord and been baptized in His name?