

## Introduction and Prologue

Justin Bass examines the historical case for the death and resurrection of Jesus, taking the historical facts that are agreed upon by virtually all scholars across the spectrum of personal faith as a foundation for his inquiry. Bass establishes these facts and explores their implications through the lens of the earliest source for Jesus' death and resurrection available to us, a tradition recorded in 1 Corinthians 15 by the Apostle Paul. In these opening remarks he elaborates somewhat on the likelihood that Paul received this tradition when meeting with Peter (eyewitness to the resurrection) in Jerusalem.

*“That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,  
and that he appeared to Cephas,  
then to the twelve.  
After that he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time ...  
then he appeared to James,  
then to all the apostles;  
and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me also.”*

### Discussion:

1. What questions about Jesus' death and resurrection do you have as you begin to read this book?
2. What are you hoping to get from reading the book and discussing it together?
3. What difference could confidence in the historicity of the resurrection make for your faith, your evangelism, or your study of theology?

### **For further discussion:**

*Consider the creedal tradition above taken from 1 Corinthians 15. What significance can you already see in this tradition for establishing confidence in the historicity of the death and resurrection of Jesus?*

## 1. Studying History is Time Traveling

In this chapter Bass introduces the idea that the tools of the historical method (“critical realism”) can, in a sense, take us back in time to observe historic events, meet significant figures, and dialogue with ancient people. Our ability to know “what really happened” in the past with confidence is limited not least because of our reliance on witnesses of mixed reliability. As such Bass briefly discusses the ideal “wishlist” of historians and the weighing up that is involved in discerning “what really happened” from the available written records. He does this with reference to the histories of Tiberius Caesar, the Jewish war with Rome, Socrates, and John the Baptist. He then goes on to introduce Paul and his writings as a (if not *the*) key source for Jesus because 1) the historical Paul is himself very knowable from his letters and other early writings about him, and 2) his transformation from “Paul the Pharisee,” persecutor of followers of Jesus, to “Paul the Apostle,” foundational member of early Christianity is so stark and poses a serious question about the reality of the resurrection.

### Discussion:

1. How confident do you feel about knowing the past truly?
2. How much have you thought about the difficulties of the historical method? Discuss the “wishlist” that Bass enumerates in this chapter.
3. Discuss the transformation from Paul “the Pharisee” to “the Apostle”. What do you find significant about that transformation?
4. Where do you currently stand in relation to Jesus at the start of this book? Are you opposed to him? Seeking him? Or are you utterly convinced of and have had your life transformed by his resurrection?
5. What questions or concerns has this chapter raised for you that you hope will be answered in future chapters and discussions?

### ***For further discussion:***

*Discuss the possible distinctions there might be between the historical past and the “real” past. Is the miraculous necessarily excluded from the historical past? (i.e. Is it true to say that even if a miracle had occurred in the past, that cannot be known as an historical fact?)*

## 2. Bedrock Eyewitness: The Apostle Paul

We can be confident of key points in Paul's life because of autobiographical material in his undisputed letters. These points give us chronological anchors by which we can fill out much of his life from his conversion to his arrest and appearance before Gallio. Paul's personal interactions with Peter and James the brother of Jesus allow us close proximity to the historical Jesus himself. The combination of the confidence we can have in reconstructing a timeline of Paul's life and his contact with the 'pillars of the church' in which he received creedal traditions and hymns about Jesus provides a remarkable foundation for examining the historical credibility of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

### Discussion:

1. What are the key points in Paul's life that Bass highlights?
2. What do you find interesting about the chronology of Paul's life?
3. Do you have any questions / doubts about points on the timeline? Discuss Bass's process that gets him to the dates for these events.
4. Why might historical confidence in the life of Paul be important for establishing confidence in the resurrection of Jesus?

### ***For further discussion:***

*Read Galatians 1-2 together and discuss what it tells you about Paul's life. What details might be important when it comes to his witness to the historical and risen Christ? What impression do you get of Paul as a person from these autobiographical details?*

### 3. Bedrock Source: 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

Bass introduces the creedal tradition found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 as a key source for evaluating the historicity of the resurrection. With reference to the discovery of the Great Isaiah Scroll, he discusses the confidence we can have in the transmission process for this creedal tradition. He then discusses the likely dating of this pre-Pauline tradition and the significance of the early date that is agreed among scholars.

#### Discussion:

1. Discuss the significance of the discovery of the Great Isaiah Scroll and its similarity to the Isaiah text dated to 7<sup>th</sup> Century AD. What confidence does this inspire generally in the accuracy of the biblical text that we have today?
2. What significance might there be for 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 to contain a creedal tradition passed on to Paul from other Christians (as opposed to simply a summary that Paul himself formulated)?
3. How does the confidence in Paul's timeline from the previous chapter help scholars (and us) date this creed's origin to within a decade after Jesus' death?
4. Bass suggests that Dunn's dating of the formulation of the creedal tradition to within a few months of Jesus' death is the best option. How soon after Jesus' death do you think it was composed and why?
5. In general, what's the significance of the agreement between key figures in early Christianity (Peter, James, Paul) represented by this creedal tradition?

#### ***For further discussion:***

*Look up the references to other early traditions in Paul that Bass mentions. What confidence do they give you about faith in Jesus?*

#### 4. Crucifixion “Christ Died for Our Sins and He Was Buried”

In this chapter Bass goes through the beginning of this creed that relates to Jesus’ death and burial. He discusses the Roman practice of crucifixion, the Jewish practice of burial of the dead, and the historical witness to the fact that Jesus was in fact crucified. He also briefly elaborates on what it means that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” drawing on Old Testament passages related to substitutionary death and sin bearing.

##### Discussion:

1. “Christ Died” – It is sometimes speculated on a popular level that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross, but that he fainted and revived and recovered in the cool of the tomb. How does the description of crucifixion in the ancient world at the beginning of this chapter address this idea?
2. Why is it such an indisputable fact that Jesus did in fact die (on a cross, not later by natural causes)?
3. “For our sins according to the scriptures” – What do you understand by the idea that Jesus died *for sins*?
4. How would you describe the significance of the fact that Jesus described his own death in terms from Jeremiah that pointed to it being *‘for sins’*?
5. “He was buried” – Christ burial is not affirmed by the 99 percent of scholars that is required for Bass to call it a ‘bedrock fact’. Nonetheless it is widely affirmed by scholars and Bass makes a case to treat it as historically true. How confident do you feel in Christ’s burial from the discussion in this chapter?
6. Consider the remarks at the end of the chapter. Why is the empty tomb important, but not essential enough to be included in this short, memorable creedal tradition?

## 5. Resurrection “He Was Raised on the Third Day”

This chapter is setting us up to answer the question ‘what actually happened to cause the disciples to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead?’ Before getting to that, Bass rules out the possibility that the disciples simply made it up – that they took a common expectation from their day and applied it to Jesus – by demonstrating the theological innovation involved in the belief in a crucified and raised messiah.

### Discussion:

1. What was the Jewish hope for resurrection (among those who looked forward to resurrection)?
2. Before moving to the contrasts, what continuity (if any) do you see between the Old Testament and 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish hope for resurrection and the early Christian proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection and the hope that it brings.
3. Discuss the kinds of expectations for a messiah that were common among Jews around the time of Jesus. How do these differ to the Christian proclamation of Jesus as messiah?
4. Had Jesus remained dead, how could the disciples have gone from the existing resurrection hope and messianic expectations of their day to believing and proclaiming that Jesus was the risen messiah and the beginning of the final resurrection of all?

### *For further discussion:*

*Who is Jesus? What is the significance of his resurrection for understanding his identity and for understanding the nature of Christian hope?*

## 6. Appearances: To Peter, the Twelve, More than Five Hundred, James, and Paul

Bass demonstrates that the resurrection appearances attested to in 1 Corinthians 15 are not only *not* hallucinations, but they are also unique in history (i.e. they weren't invented in order to venerate Jesus based on an existing pattern). They must have seen something that was significant enough for them to say that they saw Jesus risen from the dead. Bass discusses the significance of the witness of the various people listed in the credal tradition for the historical case for Jesus' resurrection.

### Discussion:

1. Discuss your openness to the possibility of miracles or the supernatural in history. Are you predisposed against the resurrection as an explanation of the evidence?
2. Discuss the possibility that the witnesses to the resurrection were in fact hallucinating. Is this plausible given Dale Allison's work on hallucinations and what we know of the circumstances around Jesus' death and the probable mental state of those who claim to have seen him alive?
3. Scholars virtually all agree on the first three appearances listed in the credal tradition (Peter, James and 'the Twelve'). Are you convinced by Bass's argument in favour of the historicity of the other appearances?
4. If they were not hallucinating, what could these followers of Jesus have seen to convince them that Jesus had been raised?

## **7. The Rise of the Nazarenes: “Fighting against God”**

Taking as his cue the prophecy of Gamaliel in Acts ?? that if the Jesus movement is really from God it cannot be stopped, Bass points to the unlikely endurance and growth of Christianity at its inception in the Roman Empire and throughout the whole world today as further evidence of the historical fact of the resurrection. This point is strengthened by the comparisons that he makes to other messianic movements of the time and to the origins of other major world religions.

### **Discussion:**

1. What might the significance be for the enduring and explosive growth of Christianity?
2. Discuss the contrast between Christianity’s early growth and the stark failures of the other messianic movements?
3. In what way is the origin of Christianity unique among world religions? How does this lend weight to the credibility of the resurrection?

### ***For further discussion:***

*Discuss how you might use the growth of Christianity as an evangelistic hook. How would you answer the objection that many world religions have grown and thrived, so how does Christianity’s growth make it unique (and suggest that it is true)?*



**Conclusion: “This is Wondrous Strange”**

Bass draws the evidence together and concludes that the only positions that plausibly remain are to affirm that the resurrection really did happen or to throw your hands up in the air and conclude ‘I don’t know what they saw’. Nevertheless, he wants to push the agnostic to follow the evidence all the way through to its conclusion and have the courage to embrace the ‘wondrous strange’ as a foreigner invited in. He offers a few thought experiments that suggest that the weight of evidence is already enough to confidently affirm the resurrection as historically true.

**Discussion:**

1. Discuss the ‘Thought Experiments’ one at a time as a group.
2. Does settling for “I don’t know what they saw” feel like a satisfying place to land? Are you willing to confidently say, “Jesus was raised on the third day”?
3. Share what your next steps might be for exploring the resurrection or the person of Jesus. What difference does this all make to your life/studies?