

A P A R E N T ' S  
T O  
G U I D E

# the Evidence for the Resurrection

**axis**

# Huge, If True

There is no single event more central to the Christian faith than the resurrection. It serves as the keystone to several of our deepest hopes: the notion that God is both powerful and trustworthy; the doctrine of eternal life; even the very belief that Jesus and the Father are one: it's all rooted in the resurrection.

But can we really be confident in this incredible claim? Our kids certainly have some concerns. They've picked up doubts and questions from background cultural radiation (as well as the natural teenage inclination to challenge authority). They're not confident they can trust what their parents, teachers, pastors, or Scriptures say about it; all those sources are suspect, biased, up-for-debate. The next generation has been advertised to since before they were able to speak, and it's made them wary of anyone selling things that sound too good to be true.

But there are reasons for the hope within—even as there are reasons to be sensitive, compassionate, and gentle with those who experience doubt.

## — Does the resurrection really matter?

Paul put it succinctly when he said that if our hope in Christ is only for this life—that is, if the resurrection was a ruse, and we have been fooled into believing in a life-after-death that will never come—then we are “of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). The resurrection is foundational.

First, the resurrection is proof that Jesus is who He said He is and that He can do what He said He can do. Jesus Himself staked His divinity on the resurrection (Matt. 16:1–4), and Paul affirmed it in Romans 1:4. Without the resurrection, then, Jesus is at best a teacher or prophet—and at worst, a complete fraud, someone who preached righteousness but made blatantly false claims to divinity. If, however, He is in fact the first and only human being to come back from death without aid, we can be confident that He is truly the Son of God because the proof He offered fits the claim (that is, rising from the dead is something that history shows no human can achieve, so it must be something only a superhuman or deity can do, and therefore the proof actually is sufficient evidence for His claim to divinity).

Second, the resurrection is our confidence that death will not be the end for us. Jesus is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20), “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), and the source of God's promise of eternity (1 John 5:11–12). The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death (1 Cor. 15:26), but that's only true if our God has truly defeated it already.

Finally, the resurrection gives us confidence that our King is still alive and involved. Jesus arrived in Israel after a 400-year period of divine silence; the Israelites were subjects to a brutal empire and hadn't heard from God in generations. Was God still there? Was He still paying attention to them? We hear echoes of these questions in our own lives sometimes—and in those of our kids. But if Jesus has risen, if He is still sitting at the right hand of the Father and interceding for us, we can be confident that God is not only still around, but involved in the lives of all His children.

## — So how can we be sure?

You may have noticed that as kids get older, the argument “Because I said so” has severely diminishing returns. They’ve started to realize that truth claims and power are intertwined, and they have a low tolerance for arguments that rest only on someone else’s authority.

Because of that, some teens will have a tough time accepting a resurrection that’s defended only by the similar “Because the Bible said so” argument. We need more comprehensive answers to their questions.

To do that, we can turn to the science of textual criticism.

Textual criticism is a field of history concerned primarily with testing the veracity of ancient documents. It’s what’s behind the curtain of basic history books: our source for information about the lives, words, and deeds of people like Shakespeare, Caesar Augustus, and Cleopatra.

There are many significant questions involved in textual criticism, but we’ll focus mainly on two:

- How closely do our current texts match original manuscripts (called “autographs”)?
- How reliable were those autographs?

## — How closely do our current texts match the original manuscripts?

We don’t talk about it very regularly in the American church, but it’s important to recognize that our Bibles are translations of copies of copies (of copies of copies) of letters, poems, and oral recitations that originated thousands of years ago. The Bible claims to be “God-breathed... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16), but that would apply to the original texts; can we really be certain that our modern Bibles match what was written?

Good news: We can. Scholars test the adherence of copies to the original manuscript by asking two questions: How many copies exist, and how old are they? The more copies there are, the better context the scholars have for reconstructing the contents of the original; and if the oldest available copies were written not long after the original, it’s more likely that they match their predecessor. You can think of it as a game of Telephone, except that documents are allowed to pass their messages to more than just one recipient at a time, so even if one recipient gets it wrong, the others can collaborate to find the error.

The New Testament is strong in both categories. Scholars have uncovered over 3,000 independent fragments from the New Testament, and there are 34 complete copies of the New Testament, which are dated between the 9th and 15th centuries, though several are younger. The [Codex Sinaiticus](#), the oldest complete copy of the New Testament, was written [around 340 AD](#). The Chester Beatty Papyri, which contains most of the New Testament, is dated even earlier: somewhere around [the middle of the 3rd century](#).

For comparison, here’s a summary of the copies we have of secular historical works:

*The important First Century document [The Jewish War](#), by Jewish aristocrat and historian Josephus, survives in only nine complete manuscripts dating from the 5th Century—four centuries after they were written.* [\[3\]](#) *Tacitus’ [Annals of Imperial Rome](#) is one of the chief historical sources for*

*the Roman world of New Testament times, yet, surprisingly, it survives in partial form in only two manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages.[4] Thucydides' History survives in eight copies. There are 10 copies of Caesar's Gallic Wars, eight copies of Herodotus' History, and seven copies of Plato, all dated over a millennium from the original. Homer's Iliad has the most impressive manuscript evidence for any secular work with 647 existing copies.[5]*

—Greg Koukl, "[Is the New Testament Text Reliable?](#)"

## How reliable were those original manuscripts?

So we can be confident that our Bibles have *not* been substantively changed in the millennia since the texts were first written. But that's not all that we're worried about. Can we actually trust that these accounts were true as written?

To test a document's factual accuracy, we can again ask "How many and how old?" though in a subtly different way. This time, our concern has to do primarily with whether the manuscripts were both (1) widely circulated and (2) originally written *close to the events they describe*.

These criteria are important because the wider and earlier the document is circulated, the easier it is for someone to corroborate it—or refute it. If someone on TV were to claim that your father was an alien superhuman from Krypton, you'd be available to refute it quite easily; you're close to the source. You remember all the times your father stubbed his toe or poured orange juice into his cereal by mistake—hardly the behavior of an *ubermensch*. Because the claim reached you and you're an eyewitness, you would probably be able to debunk the idea publicly.

Here again, the Bible (and in particular the New Testament) proves reliable. Our best evidence indicates that the first copies of the Gospels were in widespread circulation only 70 years after the events they describe—a remarkably small gap in comparison to other historical documents. This means that when the stories of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection began to spread, there were still eyewitnesses walking the earth to corroborate or deny the accounts—Paul even mentions a crowd of 500 people who saw the resurrected Christ and were still around to talk about it (1 Cor. 15:6). The Gospels, too, include innumerable tiny details that could easily have been checked by their 1st-century audience. But we have no accounts of eyewitnesses refuting these early manuscripts.

That's not the only compelling evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels; we can also consider the lives of the disciples who wrote them. First, the Gospels relate several embarrassing stories about their authors' doubts, impulsiveness, and occasional stupidity. Peter's denial of Christ and the petty squabbles over who would be the greatest disciple are hardly the kinds of stories that inspire trust in the leaders of a fledgling movement—yet the Gospels are littered with such stories. If one were composing a story one knew to be false, why would one include details that make him and his friends look bad? The only reason to include such details is because they're true; they actually happened.

Similarly, if the Gospel writers wanted to construct an elaborate fiction about the resurrection, they did themselves no favors by presenting women as its first witnesses. In 1st-century Palestine, the testimony of a woman wasn't enough to charge a criminal, much less confirm a supernatural event.

Last of all, we can look to the deaths of those same disciples. The people who wrote about and preached the resurrection of Christ were tortured, enslaved, and executed in horrific ways. Even

under extreme duress, they refused to recant their story. People will rarely give up their lives, even for something they believe with all their heart; *it's even harder to face death for something you know is a lie.*

## — What other evidence is there?

In their book, [The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus](#), Gary Habermas and Michael R. Licona outline five other important pieces of evidence that corroborate the Bible's claims that Jesus was Lord and that He rose from the dead. Together they make up what's called the "Minimal Facts Approach," which "considers only those data that are so strongly attested historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar . . . even the rather skeptical ones." (To be specific, the first four are agreed on by approximately 95% of scholars in the field as being historically accurate, and the final one is agreed on by approximately 75%. For a more thorough analysis, we highly recommend their book.)

- 1. Death by Rome.** This is pretty straightforward. In order to rise from the dead, one must first die. So did Jesus actually die? [Many extra-biblical sources](#), including [Jewish historian Josephus](#), corroborate the fact that Rome did actually condemn Jesus to death on a cross.
- 2. This one is actually two-fold: A. The disciples claimed the resurrection**, meaning the resurrection was claimed right away by those who would have been able to convincingly deny it if it were false, not years or decades later after enough time had elapsed for a myth to take hold; and **B. The disciples believed in the resurrection even in the face of death.** If, as skeptics have claimed throughout the centuries, the disciples were wilfully making up a story, it's very unlikely they would've continued claiming it was true when threatened with torture and execution, like so many of them were. Indeed, liars make bad martyrs.
- 3. Paul.** The Apostle Paul was originally Saul, i.e. the number one enemy of Christians everywhere. He was [a Pharisee](#) and described [in his own words](#) the zeal with which he sought out and persecuted the Christians who so threatened his entire belief system and way of life. But then something happened that reversed the trajectory of his life forever and caused him to join the ranks of those he persecuted and, eventually, [to die alongside them](#). It's highly unlikely that he could have been convinced to do this except for an encounter with the risen Lord Himself.
- 4. Doubting James.** Entirely separately from Paul, Jesus' half-brother James went from being a skeptic to a supporter. [John 7](#) and [Mark 3](#) mention that Jesus' family (and specifically his brothers) thought He was out of His mind. But after the resurrection, he too had a conversion and became an outspoken supporter of Jesus as Messiah. [Josephus records](#) that he also was martyred for his beliefs.
- 5. The empty tomb.** [Extra-biblical sources corroborate](#) the fact that the tomb was empty. However, many of them offer different explanations as to why, like that the disciples stole the body, so why should we believe the Bible's reason? There are 4 reasons.
  - [Testimony of women.](#) [The Talmud states](#) that any evidence given by a woman was not credible, so if the disciples were propagating a lie, why would they have included women as the first witnesses of the empty and of the Risen Lord? The only logical reason to do so at the time would be because it was true and they were simply relaying facts.
  - [Enemy attestation.](#) The enemy's of Christ didn't deny the empty tomb; they simply tried to explain it by saying that someone had stolen the body. But "[if a source admits](#) a fact

that is decidedly not in its favor, the fact is genuine.”

- **Lack of embellishment.** If the story was simply a legend or contained later theological motifs, it would be more clear that the story developed later, possibly as an apologetic device. However, as it stands, it lacks embellishment and exaggeration, therefore adding to its believability.
- **Where’s the body?** All it would have taken for someone to completely debunk Christianity forever was a body. Produce Jesus’ body, disprove the whole thing. And considering that the tomb where His body had been put was in Jerusalem—the economic, religious, and cultural center of the area at that time—hiding, moving, or stealing the body would’ve been next to impossible. It would’ve been like trying to do that in modern-day New York City. Yet a body was never produced or found.

## — What if my child doesn’t accept the evidence?

If your child is struggling to come to terms with a resurrected Christ, don’t panic.

Obviously, this situation can be deeply stressful. We love our kids and want the best for them, so how should we react when it appears their very soul is in the balance? What if they reject the Gospel? What if they reject God?

There are two stories in Scripture to which we can turn for guidance and comfort. The first is Thomas the disciple, who refused to believe his peers’ absurd story about Jesus rising from the dead and walking through walls. “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands,” he said, “and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25).

Not long after, Jesus appeared to the disciples, including Thomas, who changed his tune pretty quickly. Jesus chided him for his skepticism and articulated a blessing on those who believe without seeing. But, importantly, **he never condemned Thomas**. Jesus understood His friend’s difficulty: to Thomas, it seemed like the other disciples, broken by grief and shock and terror at what would happen to them next, had collectively lost their minds. Thomas wanted to keep his grip on reality. He wanted to know the truth.

The second story is that of the Berean church. When Paul visited the Berean Jews in Acts 17:11, the people listened eagerly to his preaching—and then fact-checked him relentlessly. The Bereans wouldn’t accept the Gospel until they had made absolutely sure that Paul wasn’t lying to them. They were wary of false teaching. Scripture calls this relentless truth-seeking “noble.”

If your child has a hard time coming to grips with the evidence for the resurrection, try to see in them that same Berean passion for authenticity—and model Christ’s gracious response to Thomas’s doubts. Your child isn’t content to accept someone else’s answers; they want to find what’s real. This may feel frightening, but we have not been given a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7). If we are serious in our belief that God is the ultimate reality, then our kids’ unrelenting quest for truth isn’t a threat to their eternity. It’s a road that leads directly to the cross.

## — How can I talk to my teen who doesn’t believe?

If your teen has looked at the evidence and doesn’t find it compelling, a conversation about types of evidence could be helpful. For example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints makes many huge claims (like that [Jesus came to North America](#) after He was resurrected in

Israel, that there were [massive civilizations in North America](#) before the Native Americans, that these civilizations had huge battles). So what does it offer as proof of these claims? One would expect archaeological evidence, as well as textual evidence outside of their scriptures at the very least. Instead, their scriptures tell a potential convert to anticipate a burning in one's bosom, that one "[shall feel that it is right](#)." But such proof is, by nature, subjective. How do you test and verify feelings? Can feelings be wrong? Feelings may convince the people who experience them, but they can't be shared nor objectively proven to be true or false. In fact, due to the [lack of objective evidence](#) to back up the LDS church's claims, [historians do not believe in the historicity](#) of The Book of Mormon.

In contrast, as seen above, the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is objective, corroborated by outside sources, believable historically, and available to anyone with the time and will to research it.

If your teen hasn't searched for evidence, it could be because they don't know that it's out there or because they're afraid if they look too deeply, they'll come up empty. This is a great opportunity for us as parents to go on a search with them, helping them wrestle through any doubts or questions they have. Again, God is the author of truth, so no question or doubt is bigger than Him, nor is He afraid of our questions. The more we can make that clear to our kids, the safer they'll feel to dig deeper. (Check out our "[Parent's Guide to a Doubting Teen](#)" for more resources for digging into doubts and questions with your teens!)

Last of all, it can be helpful to walk your teen through a thought exercise: What evidence would it take for them to change their mind? If they can't think of anything (or demand supernatural evidence like Thomas received), their objection may be grounded more in subconscious feelings than in their evidentiary standards. For these teens, textual criticism is just another argument; what they need is love, respect, and refuge. Reassure them that though such evidence is rarely offered, it isn't necessary: God has given us enough.

## — Risen Indeed

The evidence of a resurrected Christ is more than enough for us to feel confident in the claim—and sure in our hope for eternal life—even as we meet skepticism from our peers and our children.

But when our children struggle, we would be wise to remember that our God is alive and well, abounding in grace and power, and not afraid of questions. His authority is not threatened by our doubts. His love meets us where we are.

And that is the greatest hope we can ever have.

## — Related Axis Resources

To read before talking to your teen:

- [A Parent's Guide to a Doubting Teen](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to the Bible](#)

To watch with your teen:

- [Conversation Kit](#) on the Bible
- [Conversation Kit](#) on Evangelism

## Additional Resources

### Does the resurrection matter?

- “[Why is the resurrection of Christ important?](#)” gotquestions.org
- “[The Significance of Christ’s Resurrection](#),” christiancourier.com
- “[The Significance of the Resurrection](#),” bible.org
- “[How important is the resurrection to Christianity?](#)” blueletterbible.org
- “[3 Reasons the Resurrection Matters](#),” christianity.com

### Are the Gospels reliable?

- [Resource pages](#) from ntgateway.com
- “[Is the New Testament Text Reliable?](#)” standtoreason.org
- [Evidence That Demands a Verdict](#) and [The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict](#) by Josh McDowell

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