

Sermon About the Resurrection of Jesus - 1

Good morning, Sanctus.

I'm so glad that you're joining us once again, or for the first time. If you're here in Ontario or the greater Toronto area, or maybe you're tuning in from somewhere else in Canada, or maybe you're in the States or in England or Australia, or somewhere else in the world—no matter who you are, where you're coming from, we're so glad that you're joining us today.

We're in the middle of this series where we're systematically and intentionally slowing down to wrestle with unbelief and doubt and scepticism and deconstruction, which, by the way, means 5,000 things to 5,000 people. So if you're a long-term Christian, you're welcome. If you've just crossed the line of faith, you're welcome. If you're curious and seeking, you're welcome. If you're an outright sceptic, you're welcome.

The goal of this series is to help all of us find signposts to begin the journey, to do well on the journey, to keep going on the journey, not to get lost or shipwrecked in the middle of the journey, to arrive at the right destination, and then to do this for others.

Now, today, we're really going to start wrestling with the intellectual side of the Christian faith. We've got to catch this again: Faith is not blind leaping in the dark. Faith, by definition for Christians, is informed trust, fact, and encounter. Faith also implies relationship. And here's the simple thing; everything boils down to this: Did Jesus exist? Did Jesus actually die? And did Jesus physically come back from the dead? Because that's the ball game.

Years ago, when I preached a version of this sermon, I told this story: I love Swiss Chalet fries. Some of you outside of Ontario have no clue what I'm talking about, but just think about the food you like best. I love these fries; I think they're amazing, they're God given. Now what

does this have to do with faith or struggle? Well, it's one thing to know these fries exist. It's another thing to see advertisements about those very fries. It's another thing to hear other people talk about those fries and how good they are. It's another thing to stand outside of the restaurant called Swiss Chalet and press my face against the window and watch someone eat those fries, which, by the way, would be creepy and the cops would show up. It's a whole other thing for me to walk into the restaurant and see people eating the fries and smell the fries. You could say I am Swiss Chalet fries adjacent.

But it's another thing altogether when I sit at the table, and I get the fries, and I dip them in the sauce that Jesus himself has invented and put them in my mouth and taste them. That's the trajectory of the journey we're talking about in this series. Not just knowing but *knowing*. There are two avenues of genuine knowledge—fact and encounter.¹ For today's journey, this is going to be all about knowing Jesus.

C. S. Lewis, the famed scholar and atheist who became a Christian after he read everything Jesus said about himself, said this,

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.

¹ Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2004), 36.

But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

Jesus claimed to be equal with God, claimed to be God himself, claimed he could forgive sins, claimed that he existed before he was born, and claimed he was the only way back to God. He promised eternal life and supposedly physically rose from the dead. And unlike all the other great leaders or historical figures, he paired outrageous claims with humility, love, care, and barrier breaking that actually, in many ways, has never been repeated again.

You can't remain neutral on the teachings, claims, and actions of Jesus. *Either* Jesus did not physically rise from the dead—and if he didn't, then he's a good man, or a prophet, or a political revolutionary, and he just got killed for standing up, or being lazy, a liar, crazy, or fill in the blank with whatever you want to say about him—or he did rise from the dead, and *everything changes*.

I wrote this years ago: If Jesus rose from the dead, then atheism is answered. If Jesus rose from the dead, then agnosticism is resolved. If Jesus rose from the dead, then every religion must reevaluate itself at its core. If Jesus rose from the dead, death is answered and we know what fully lies beyond the grave because someone came back. If Jesus rose from the dead, then the human family might not now need to ask who God is, what he is like, and if he is involved. If Jesus rose from the dead, then you can meet God. If Jesus rose from the dead, there might be purpose in

² Donald T. Williams, "Lacking, Ludicrous, or Logical? The validity of Lewis's 'Trilemma': Pro," *Pints with Jack* (blog), <https://www.pintswithjack.com/>.

your life more than money, sex, power, being moral, or being religious. If Jesus rose from the dead, then the coffin or cremation fire is not the end.³ Let's begin our conversation.

It's around AD 53 to 55, twenty years after Jesus died, and a man named Paul, who used to be against Jesus, who attended and encouraged the murders of early Christians, writes this to an early Christian community:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:3–6)

Do you see it? The Christian faith, the foundation of it, is rooted in history, in testimony, in people saying, “I was there; this is not fairy tale; this is not conspiracy; this is not fake news; this is not myth; it's real.” Most scholars, by the way, believe that Paul held interviews that he based the above statement on when he visited Jerusalem three years after his personal encounter with Jesus. This means that Paul learned everything I just said between two and eight years after Jesus's crucifixion. Paul met with the disciples personally. He interviewed them.

Now, if you've ever studied history—most of us haven't—but if you have studied history formally, you know what I just said is massive. It stands out in the realm of history. And let's not

³ Jonathan Thompson, *Perseverance: Fifteen Reflections on Christian Ministry at the Halfway Point—An Invitation to Make It to the Finish Line Well—Oh God, Help* (2023), 155.

forget, Paul's works were letters designed to be publicly read. They weren't private correspondence. There were multiple copies written in his lifetime. They would be sent to Jerusalem and beyond. It would have easily been dismissed if people said, "No, that's not true," and "I was there; that did not happen; that's a lie; those details were wrong; that was invented."⁴ But that didn't happen.

Paul keeps going, and he raises the stakes.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:13–19)

This is an all or nothing deal. This is a zero-sum game. Catch this: We as Christians unashamedly root ourselves in history and not myth. Why don't we run from history? Because we believe that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are actual accessible historic facts.

⁴ R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), 264–65.

Years ago, I was flipping through Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*. Dawkins is a famous scholar, but he's an atheist fundamentalist. And he wrote this, "Nobody knows who the four evangelists were, but they almost certainly never met Jesus personally. Much of what they wrote was in no sense an honest attempt at history. . . . The gospels are ancient fiction."⁵ Around that same time, I watched John Lennox, who's a world class philosopher and mathematician from Oxford, debate Richard Dawkins on YouTube. Back and forth they went. Is there a God, and can he be known? What about human value, morality, and eternal life? And then, like a thunderbolt, John Lennox just sort of moved to the side of his chair and looked at Richard and said, "Richard, you don't understand because you don't understand how to handle history." His point is, this isn't a scientific experiment that you redo in a lab. This is history, and you don't have a clue what you're talking about when it comes to history.

There are four simple steps that historians tell us that you need to verify and access history.⁶ First, you need multiple independent sources.⁷ Second, you're always looking for when enemies support the historical claim. It's one thing if your friend, family, mother, father, or those who can make money off what you're saying go, "Oh, it's true." But when enemies start saying, "Oh, that happened, but it was wrong," or "That happened, but I have questions," that's when you pay attention.⁸ So you've got multiple independent sources and enemies supporting historical claims. Third, you look for eyewitness accounts. They are always stronger than secondhand accounts,

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 96–97.

⁶ Larry Tauton, "Richard Dawkins vs John Lennox | Has Science Buried God? Debate," video of debate, Oxford, England, June 1, 2017, hosted on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVEuQg_Mglw.

⁷ Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel, 2004), 36.

⁸ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 36–37.

less exaggeration, less time to build a lie. Things aren't corrupted as much.⁹ And number four is this: We must always be looking for embarrassing admissions of the people involved, as well as cultural nuances that support the historical claims.¹⁰ Amazingly, when you look at all the evidence, all four of these categories are overflowing with examples regarding the person, claims, and life of Jesus.

So when we ask, "Should we believe in Jesus's existence, life, death, resurrection?" do these four things show up? Yes, they do. But before we get there, before we deal with Jesus's death and resurrection, the real question some of you are asking is more fundamental: Did Jesus actually exist? Let me first ask you a question: Do you think that Plato and Julius Caesar existed? How do you know? Let's look at the facts.

Plato lived from 427 to 347 BC. The earliest manuscript copy of Plato's writing in existence today was written in AD 900. That is 1,200 years after Plato's death! And there are only two copies of these manuscripts in existence. And yet read any history book, listen to a lecture at any university, and no one is suggesting he did not exist or all of this is fiction.¹¹

What about Julius Caesar? He was one of the most celebrated and trusted historical figures. Caesar lived from 100 to 44 BC and the earliest manuscript copy of his writings dates back to AD 900, putting our best evidence of Caesar ever existing 1,000 years after his death. And there are ten copies of ancient manuscripts of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*.¹²

⁹ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel, 2004), 39–40.

¹⁰ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel, 2004), 39.

¹¹ "Alpha Short #2 Alister McGrath," Alpha Film Series, The Lighthouse UK, 3:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Qz5WYhZQJ4s>.

¹² "Alpha Short #2 Alister McGrath," Alpha Film Series, The Lighthouse UK, 3:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Qz5WYhZQJ4s>.

If people on the internet or you yourself question the Bible based on when it was written, or being “translated so many times” (it was not; we have the same Greek manuscripts today, as we will talk about next) and question whether Jesus existed, then you must also be really sure that Julius Caesar and Plato were completely fictional characters and never really existed.

The four gospels of the Bible are bibliographical accounts of the life of Jesus. The normal objective measure of the reliability of historical documents are (1) the number of available copies of ancient manuscripts and (2) the time span between the original version and the date of those copies still in existence today. Some of the earliest manuscript fragments of the New Testament are the John Rylands Fragments, Chester Beatty Papyri, and the Bodmer Papyri, which were written between AD 50 and 100. Copies of these papyri were reproduced in AD 125 to 200, meaning that the time span between the original texts and these copies, which are still in

“In a comparative study, for example, the book *Natural History*, written by Pliny Secundus, is known because of seven manuscripts. The earliest copy was written 750 years after the original text. The most frequently copied work after the New Testament from ancient history is the Iliad written by Homer. There are 643 copies in existence. The earliest copy was written 400 years after the original. By comparison, there are well over 25,000 extant manuscripts of portions of the New Testament. In addition, a fragment of the New Testament (NT) has been dated to within 50 years of the original, whole books to within 100 years, and the whole NT to within 225–250 years. Sir Frederic Kenyon, former Director of the British Museum, concluded, ‘The interval between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence [i.e. our oldest manuscripts] becomes so small as to be negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed.’ The scholar Dr. William F. Albright also wrote: ‘The excessive scepticism shown toward the Bible [by certain schools of thought] has been progressively discredited. Discovery after discovery has established the accuracy of numerous details . . .’ In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptised Jew between the forties and eighties of the first century (very probably sometime between about AD 50 and 75.” Stephen Sizer, “The Historical Jesus: The Evidence from Scripture and Archaeology,” blog post, December 3, 2017, <https://stephensizer.com/2017/12/the-historical-jesus-the-evidence-from-scripture-and-archaeology/>.

existence today, is between twenty-nine and one hundred and thirty years, dating all these manuscripts between fifty and one hundred years after the death of Jesus Christ.¹³

This is way closer than almost anything else we've got in history. All the original gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were written thirty-five to sixty years after the Jesus event. Mark was written before AD 70, which is forty years after Jesus's death.¹⁴ So don't be quick to throw it all out. They're so close, and actually, today we know of 5,800 Greek fragments or full manuscripts of the Bible. There's 10,000 in Latin and 9,300 in other languages. It's the most documented book in history.¹⁵

Oh, but let's still ask the question: Did Jesus live? Did Jesus die on a cross? And is there any evidence that he was even buried? Well, first of all, of course, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, talk about it all the time. But the real question is, did anyone outside of the Bible talk about it? Did anyone who was not a Christian, who did not believe but was trustworthy, say, "Yeah, Jesus existed," or "Yeah, he was killed, or he was buried"? So many people did.

Josephus is the first one. He lived from AD 37 to 100. He was a Jewish guy and a Roman historian, and he actually was an expert. He wrote about the first Jewish Roman War and the destruction of the Jewish temple. His most important works are *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. In that last book, this is what he wrote about Jesus:

¹³ "The Expository Files," The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts the Integrity of the New Testament, Special 2013 Series, <https://www.bible.ca/ef/topical-the-earliest-new-testament-manuscripts.htm>.

¹⁴ Murray Smith, "History's Biggest Hoax? The Question of the Resurrection," TGC (Australia Edition), March 23, 2021, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/historys-biggest-hoax-the-question-of-the-resurrection>.

¹⁵ "Alpha Short #2 Alister McGrath," Alpha Film Series, The Lighthouse UK, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Qz5WYhZQJ4s>.

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles: He was the Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.¹⁶

Another guy named Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian who lived from AD 55 to 120, also wrote about Nero and his attacks on Christians:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.¹⁷

There's a guy named Lucian of Samosata. He was a well-known Greek satirist, a comedian, and lecturer. He has eighty books connected to his name, and he regularly made fun of Christians during this time. But listen to what he said about Jesus: "He was second only to that one who they still worship today, that man in Palestine, who was crucified because he brought this new

¹⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64, vol. 433, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, vol. 322, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1999).

form of initiation into the world.”¹⁸ And another point, he says, “Having convinced themselves that they are immortal and will live forever, those poor wretches despise death and most willingly gave themselves to it. Moreover, that first lawgiver of theirs persuaded them that they’re all brothers the moment they transgress and deny the Greek gods and began worshipping that crucifying sophist and living by his laws.”¹⁹

Mara bar (“son of”) Serapion, a Stoic philosopher from Syria, wrote a letter that some scholars date around AD 73. Interestingly, he was complaining about the unjust treatment of three famed people, Socrates, Pythagoras, and Jesus. He says, “Or (what advantage came to) the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them.”²⁰

There’s another thing in the Jewish context called the Talmud, which is the ancient record of Jewish history, law, and rabbinical thinking compiled throughout the centuries. And there are multiple references to Jesus there. Here are two of them: “Yeshu, the Nazarene, was hung or hanged, and a herald went forth before him 40 days heralding.” At another point it says, “Since they did not find anything in his defence, they hanged him on a Sabbath eve and on the eve of the Passover.”²¹

Among the witnesses, you’ve got Greeks, and you’ve got Romans, and you’ve got religious Jews, and you’ve got non-religious Jews, and then, of course, all the original witnesses who actually did believe Jesus was alive, died, and rose again. So there is a matrix forming. And

¹⁸ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49.

¹⁹ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49.

²⁰ Ute Possekkel, *Evidence of Greek Philosophical Concepts in the Writings of Ephrem the Syrian* (Peeters, 1999), 29–30.

²¹ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 49.

when you read the New Testament, you have nine totally independent sources that make up the biblical accounts themselves. You have Paul's interviews, the oral traditions passed down in Christian communities, and the early written work of the early church, like the Gospels.²²

Now some of you are saying, "Well, they are ancient people and a little stupid, so they would believe anything, and they did not know the difference between fiction and history." Not true! Major work has been done in the area of anthropology that shows that ancient people clearly knew the difference between fiction, myth, and historical accounts. I love this summary by Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God*,

In his landmark book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham marshals much historical evidence to demonstrate that at the time the gospels were written there were still numerous well-known living eyewitnesses to Jesus's teaching and life events. They had committed them to memory and they remained active in the public life of the churches throughout their lifetimes, serving as ongoing sources and guarantors of the truth of those accounts. Bauckham uses evidence within the gospels themselves to show that the gospel writers named their eyewitness sources within the text to assure readers of their accounts' authenticity.

Mark, for example, says that the man who helped Jesus carry his cross to Calvary "was the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). There is no reason for the author to include such names unless the readers know or could have access to them. Mark is saying, "Alexander and Rufus vouch for the truth of what I am

²² Again to work through are the gospels even trustworthy read Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Crossway, 2018); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2007).

telling you, if you want to ask them.” Paul also appeals to readers to check with living eyewitnesses if they want to establish the truth of what he is saying about the events of Jesus’s life (1 Corinthians 15:1–6). Paul refers to a body of five hundred eyewitnesses who saw the risen Christ at once. You can’t write that in a document designed for public reading unless there really were surviving witnesses whose testimony agreed and who could confirm what the author said. All this decisively refutes the idea that the gospels were anonymous, collective, evolving oral traditions. Instead they were oral histories taken down from the mouths of the living eyewitnesses who preserved the words and deeds of Jesus in great detail.

It is not only Christ’s supporters who were still alive. Also still alive were many bystanders, officials, and opponents who had actually heard him teach, seen his actions, and watched him die. They would have been especially ready to challenge any accounts that were fabricated. For a highly altered, fictionalized account of an event to take hold in the public imagination it is necessary that the eyewitnesses (and their children and grandchildren) all be long dead. They must be off the scene so they cannot contradict or debunk the embellishments and falsehoods of the story. The gospels were written far too soon for this to occur.²³

Just look at the Gospels themselves and the appearances of Jesus after his death. The appearance to Peter is attested by Luke and Paul, the appearance to the Twelve is attested by Luke, John, and Paul, and the appearance to the women is attested by Matthew and John. The appearance narratives span such a breadth of independent sources that it cannot be reasonably

²³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008), 101–3.

denied that the earliest disciples did have such experiences.²⁴ Thus, even the skeptical German New Testament critic Gerd Lüdemann concludes, “It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’s death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.”²⁵

The history forces you there. This deals with the idea of biased testimony. As we’re going to see in the next few weeks, the gospel accounts of the resurrection also have embarrassing details and cultural nuances. It’s all there. Don’t forget that all the original followers were all fearful. They ran away from Jesus, they abandoned Jesus, they cursed Jesus out. They wanted nothing to do with him. And then they claimed to see him, claimed to eat with him, claimed to hug him and touch him, claimed to be forgiven by him. Suddenly they become bold preachers after his death and resurrection, and the vast majority of them got jailed, tortured, exiled, or murdered. Really? It is clear they really believed that Jesus had risen from the dead, and they kept telling others. By the way, that leads us to the last three witnesses I’ll list. Maybe you’ve never heard of them.

There’s a guy named Clement, a guy named Polycarp, and a guy named Ignatius of Antioch.²⁶ Clement was the bishop of Rome, and he lived from AD 30 to 98. He was murdered in AD 98 for being a Christian. He knew the original disciples; he spoke of them in his writings that are still around today; he regularly confessed, believed, and historically supported the idea of

²⁴ Geivett and Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles*, 262–75.

²⁵ Gerd Lüdemann and Alf Özen, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 80.

²⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2017), 438–71.

Jesus's existence, death, and resurrection.²⁷ He was born just around the time that Jesus started his ministry.

Ignatius of Antioch became the bishop of Antioch when he was appointed to his position by Peter, one of Jesus's original disciples. Ignatius also had connections with Paul and John. He was arrested by the Romans and executed in AD 100 for being a Christian. And all his writings and his preaching were based on the physical resurrection of Jesus.²⁸

Polycarp knew the apostles too. He was taught by them. He personally knew and was appointed by John. Remember, John is Jesus's closest friend. John wrote the book of Revelation, 1, 2, 3 John, and the gospel of John. Polycarp was murdered at eighty-six years old for being a Christian, and he spoke all the time about Jesus living, dying, and physically rising from the dead.²⁹ These three men, who are not in the Bible, had access to the original community, the original apostles, and Paul and verified what the apostles claimed. They not only verified, but they suffered and died for those claims.

I love what Paul Maier, the former professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, says: "The total evidence is so overpowering and so absolute that only the shallowest of intellects would dare deny Jesus's existence."³⁰ There's more historical proof for Jesus than for multiple other historical personalities or books, and you presume all the others existed. There are multiple sources, enemies, eyewitnesses, and embarrassing details. And the time span

²⁷ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 53–54.

²⁸ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 54–55.

²⁹ Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 54–55.

³⁰ "The Real Jesus: New Evidence from History and Archaeology | Paul Maier at Iowa State, 2013," The Veritas Forum, directed by Paul Maier, hosted by YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAN3kQHTKWI>.

between the original version of events and the copies, the same copies we have today, is within fifty to one hundred and fifty years, which is way closer than anything else in history.

The late New Testament critic Norman Perrin, who rejected the resurrection of Jesus as a fact, spent his whole life studying the New Testament and did not believe it. But here's what he wrote: "The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based."³¹ The longer you sit with the Scriptures, and the longer you sit with real history, and the longer you sit with all the sources, you can't deny Jesus's existence. And you can't deny that maybe the Bible has authenticity. And you begin to find out that wild, outrageous claims like Richard Dawkins's are just not true.

Okay, how does this help us? First, for those of us who are, "We're in, we're followers of Jesus, we love you Jesus, we're connected to him," we can be encouraged that we're not crazy. No, this is not myth. No, this is not made up. What I've based my life on is trustworthy. This helps us keep going.

Now, some of you, you are Christians, but you're about to leave the Christian faith, or you're struggling to stay in the Christian faith. Or you're like, "Man, I like Jesus, but not this church thing." Well, this, again, really brings home how central this all is and how real this is, and I think it boxes you into a corner. Even if you leave and go away, if Jesus rose from the dead, if he existed, died, and really rose from the dead, then you're going to find nothing else like him.

It was Jesus who asked this question that I think really brings home what a lot of us are feeling these days: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve." They answer, and here's

³¹ John Dominic Crossan et al., *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue* (Fortress Press, 2006), 80.

my modern paraphrase: “Well, I’ve looked everywhere else, and you’re better than any of the other options on the buffet. Nothing feeds me like you. Nothing fulfils me like you. There’s no one who’s truthful like you. There’s no one who’s gentle like you. There’s no one who’s strong like you. There’s just no one like you. You have the words of eternal life. We’ve come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Don’t forget that Jesus isn’t just true. He’s good. He’s beautiful. He’s everything. For some of you, you’re on the journey and maybe just maybe you’re starting to see over this series or today that this isn’t all just smoke and mirrors. Instead, where there’s smoke, there might be real fire. Something is going on here that might be beyond what you’ve encountered elsewhere. There might be more than meets the eye. There is an invitation that’s starting to form around you and in you. Paul wrote about what you’re thinking, and maybe now you’ll understand it. How do you become a Christian? How do you cross the line of faith? Well, Romans 10:9, if you declare with your mouth out loud, publicly, that “Jesus is Lord; I believe what he claimed about himself; he’s not a liar, not Satan, not crazy, not invented. He is who he is,” and you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, then you get saved.

This is the invitation that’s been happening this whole series, and that is happening at this moment, is for you to truly see who Jesus is, to see his claims, to see his character, see his nature, see his activities, to see his everything, and to be convinced of the facts—he lived, he died, and he rose again.

I’ll end with this. I know some of you are going, “Yeah, that’s really interesting and helpful, but I’ve read a lot of stuff, and, you know, actually, everyone believed in resurrection 2,000 years ago,” or “Actually, it was a group hallucination,” or “They just got in the wrong tomb,” or “Someone stole the body,” or “Jesus didn’t really die,” or . . . Well, next week, we’re going to

spend some significant time talking through all the conspiracy theories that, on the surface and all across the internet, seem to destroy the Christian faith.

But when you research the history and understand how history works—when you do your homework—you realize very quickly that the Christian faith isn't the smoke and mirrors. It's the conspiracy stuff that's the smoke and mirrors. So I want to invite you back to continue to be encouraged in the faith, to continue to be cornered, and say, "Well, there's no one better like him, so what am I going to do?" Or to continue to wrestle with this to see if Jesus is Lord and if Jesus really rose from the dead.

I'm just going to pray for everyone like this: Jesus, you're alive, and you are equal with God. You are God, and you're the only way home, and you're the one who brings life and resurrection and hope and healing and eternal life, all of it. For those who are in and faithful, encourage their faith. For those who've lost sight of you, your beauty and your truth, begin to show them that everything else is hollow. Remind them not only of the historical fact that proves this, but also remind them of trust. And lastly, and most significantly, we also pray for all the people around us that are struggling and wondering and trying to understand the facts and are bringing their full intellect to the table. Would you open their minds to the truth? Be with us, we pray. In Jesus's name, we all said, together, "Amen."

I look forward to seeing you next week with all the wild conspiracies about this conversation. See you then.