

TALKS TO MEN

ABOUT THE BIBLE AND THE CHRIST OF THE BIBLE

BY

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London

NISBET & CO. LTD.

22 BERNERS STREET, W. 1

FIFTH TALK

DID JESUS CHRIST REALLY RISE FROM THE DEAD?

THE resurrection of Jesus Christ is in many respects the most important fact in history. It is the Gibraltar of Christian evidences, the Waterloo of infidelity. If it can be proven to be a historic certainty that Jesus rose from the dead, then Christianity rests upon an impregnable foundation. Every essential truth of Christianity is involved in the resurrection. If the resurrection stands, every essential doctrine of Christianity stands. If the resurrection goes down, every essential doctrine of Christianity goes down. Intelligent sceptics and infidels realise this. A leading sceptic has recently said that there is no use wasting time discussing the other miracles; the essential question is, Did Jesus Christ rise from the Dead? If He did, it is easy enough to believe the other miracles. If He did not, the other miracles must go. I am confident that this sceptic has correctly stated the case.

There are three separate lines of proof of the truthfulness of the statements contained in the four Gospels regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First, *the external evidence for the authenticity and truthfulness of the Gospel narratives*. This is an altogether satisfactory argument, but we shall not enter into it at this time. The argument is long and intricate, and it would take many days to discuss it satisfactorily. The other arguments are so completely sufficient that we can do without this, good as it is in its place.

Second, the second argument is based upon *the internal proofs of the truthfulness of the Gospel records*. This argument is thoroughly conclusive, and we shall proceed to state it briefly. We shall not assume anything whatever. We shall not assume that the four Gospel records are true history. We shall not assume that the four Gospels were written by the men whose names they bear. We shall not even assume that they were written in the century in which Jesus is alleged to have lived, died, and risen again, nor in the next century, nor in the next. We will assume nothing whatever. We will start out with a fact which we all know to be true, namely, that we have the four Gospels today, whoever wrote them. We shall place the four Gospels side by side and see if we can discern in them the marks of truth or of fiction.

The first thing we notice as we compare these Gospels one with the other is that *they are four separate and independent accounts*. This appears plainly from the apparent discrepancies in the four different accounts. These apparent discrepancies are marked and many. It would have been impossible for four accounts to have been made up in collusion with one another and so many and so marked discrepancies be found in them. There is a harmony between the four accounts, but the harmony does not lie upon the surface,

but only comes out by protracted and thorough study. It is just such a harmony as would exist between accounts written by several different persons, each looking at the events recorded from his own standpoint. It is just such a harmony as would not exist in four accounts manufactured in collusion. In four accounts manufactured in collusion, whatever of harmony there was would have appeared on the surface, whatever discrepancy there was would only have come out by minute and careful study, but the case is just the opposite. The fact is, that the harmony comes out by minute and careful study; the apparent discrepancy lies upon the surface. Whether true or false, these four accounts are separate and independent from one another. The four accounts supplement one another, a third account sometimes reconciling apparent discrepancies of two.

It is plain that these accounts must be either a record of facts that actually occurred, or else fictions. If fictions, they must have been fabricated in one of two ways, either independently of one another, or in collusion with one another. They cannot have been made up independently; the agreements are too marked and too many. They cannot have been made up in collusion; as already seen, the apparent discrepancies are too numerous and too noticeable. Not made up independently, not made up in collusion, therefore it is evident that they were not made up at all. They are a true relation of facts as they actually occurred.

The next thing that we notice is that these accounts *bear striking indications of having been derived from eye-witnesses*. The account of an eyewitness is readily distinguishable from that of one who is merely retailing what others have told him. Any one who is accustomed to weigh evidence in court, or in historical study, soon learns how to distinguish the account of an eye-witness from mere hearsay evidence. Any careful student of the Gospel records of the resurrection will readily detect many marks of an eye-witness. Some years ago, when lecturing at an American University, a gentleman was introduced to me as being a sceptic. I asked him what course of study he was pursuing. He replied that he was pursuing a post-graduate course in history with a view to an historical professorship. I said, "Then you know that the account of an eye-witness differs in marked respects from the account of one who is simply telling what he has heard from others?" He replied, "Yes." I then asked, "Have you carefully read the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ?" He answered, "I have." "Tell me, have you not noticed clear indications that they were derived from eye-witnesses?" "Yes," he replied, "I have been greatly struck by this in reading the accounts." Any one else who carefully and intelligently reads them will be struck by the same fact.

The third thing that we notice about these Gospel narratives is *their naturalness, straightforwardness, artlessness, and simplicity*. The accounts indeed have to do with the supernatural, but the accounts themselves are most natural. There is an absolute absence of all attempt at colouring and effect. The simple, straightforward telling of facts as they occurred. It sometimes happens that when a witness is on the witness stand that the story he tells is so artless, so straightforward, so natural, there is such an entire absence of any attempt at colouring and effect, that his testimony bears weight independently of anything we may know of the character or previous history of the witness. As we listen to his story we say to ourselves, "This man is telling the truth." The weight of this kind of evidence is greatly increased, and reaches practical certainty, when we have several independent witnesses of this sort, all bearing testimony to the same essential facts, but with varieties of detail, one omitting what another tells, and the third unconsciously reconciling apparent discrepancies between the two. This is the precise case with the four Gospel narratives of the resurrection of Christ. The Gospel authors do not seem to have reflected at all upon the meaning or bearing of many of the facts which they relate. They simply tell right out what they saw, in all simplicity and straightforwardness, leaving the philosophising to others. Dr. William Furness, the great Unitarian scholar and critic, who certainly was not overmuch disposed in favour of the supernatural, says, "Nothing can exceed in artlessness and simplicity the four accounts of the first appearance of Jesus after His crucifixion. If these qualities are not discernible here, we must despair of ever being able to discern them anywhere."

Suppose we should find four accounts of the battle of Monmouth. Nothing decisive was known as to the authorship of these accounts, but when we laid them side by side, we found that they were manifestly independent accounts. We found, furthermore, striking indications that they were from eye-witnesses. We found them all marked by that artlessness, simplicity, and straightforwardness that carry conviction; we found that, while apparently disagreeing in minor details, they agreed substantially in their account of the battle—even though we had no knowledge of the authorship or date of these accounts, would we not in the absence of any other account say, "Here is a true account of the battle of Monmouth?" Now this is exactly the case with the four Gospel narratives; manifestly separate and independent from one another, bearing the clear marks of having been derived from eyewitnesses, characterised by an unrivalled artlessness, simplicity, and straightforwardness, apparently disagreeing in minor details, but in perfect agreement as to the great essential facts related, if we are fair and honest, are we not logically driven to say, "Here is a true account of the resurrection of Jesus?"

The next thing that we notice is *the unintentional evidence of words*,

phrases, and accidental details. It oftentimes happens that when a witness is on the stand, the unintentional evidence that he bears by words and phrases which he uses, and by accidental details which he introduces, is more convincing than his direct testimony, because it is not the testimony of the witness, but the testimony of the truth to itself. The Gospel stories abound in evidence of this sort.

Take as a first instance the fact that, in all the Gospel records of the resurrection, we are given to understand that Jesus was not at first recognised by His disciples when He appeared to them after His resurrection (*e.g.* Luke xxiv. 16; John xxi. 4). We are not told why this is so, but if we will think a while over it we can soon discover why it is so. But the Gospel narratives simply record the fact without attempting to explain it. If the stories were fictitious, they would never have been made up in this way; for the writers would have seen at once the objection that would have arisen in the minds of those who did not wish to believe in the resurrection; that is, that it was not really Jesus whom the disciples saw. Why then is the story told in this way? For the very evident reason that the evangelists were not making the story up for effect, but recording events precisely as they occurred. This was the way it occurred, and therefore this is the way in which they told it. It is not a fabrication of imaginary incidents, but an exact record of facts accurately observed and accurately recorded.

Take a second instance. In all the Gospel records of the appearances of Jesus after His resurrection, there is not a single recorded appearance to an enemy or opponent of Christ; all the appearances were to those who were already believers. Why this was so we can easily see by a little thought, but nowhere in the Gospels are we told why it was so. If the stories were made up, they certainly would never had been made up in this way. If the Gospels are, as some would have us believe, fabrications constructed 100, or 200, or 300 years after the alleged events recorded, when all the actors were dead and gone, Jesus would have been represented as appearing to Caiaphas and Annas, and Pilate and Herod, and confounding them by his reappearance from the dead, but there is no suggestion of anything of this kind in the Gospel stories. Every appearance is to one who is already a believer. Why is this so? For the very evident reason that this was the way that things occurred, and the Gospel narratives are not concerned with producing a story for effect, but simply with recording events precisely as they occurred and as they were observed.

We find still another instance in the fact that the recorded appearances of Jesus after His resurrection were only occasional. He would appear in the midst of His disciples and disappear, and not be seen again perhaps for several days. Why this was so we can easily discern. Jesus was seeking to wean

His disciples from their old-time communion with Him in the body, and to prepare them for the communion in the Spirit of the days that were to come. We are not, however, told this in the Gospel narrative; we are left to discover it for ourselves. It is doubtful if the disciples themselves at the time realised the meaning of the facts. If they had been making up a story to produce effect, they would have represented Jesus as being with them constantly, as living with them, eating and drinking with them day after day. Why then is the story told as recorded in the four Gospels? Because this is the way that it had all occurred, and the Gospel writers are simply concerned with giving an exact representation of the facts as witnessed by themselves and by others.

We find another very striking instance in what is recorded concerning the words of Jesus to Mary at their first meeting, in John xx. 17. Jesus is recorded as saying to Mary, "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father." We are not told why Jesus said this to Mary. We are left to discover the reason for ourselves if we can. The commentators have had a great deal of trouble discovering it. They vary widely from one another in their explanations of the words of Jesus. Go to the commentaries and you will find that one commentary gives one reason, and another another, and another another. I have a reason of my own that I have never seen in any commentary, but which I am persuaded is the true reason; but I have never been able to persuade others that it was the true reason. Why then is this little utterance of Jesus put in the Gospel record without a word of explanation, and which it has taken eighteen centuries to explain, and which is not altogether satisfactorily explained yet? Certainly a writer making up a story would not put in it a little detail without apparent meaning and without any attempt at an explanation of it. Stories that are made up are made up for a purpose; details that are inserted are inserted for a purpose, a purpose more or less evident; but eighteen centuries of study have not been able to find out the purpose why this is inserted. Why, then, is it there? Because this is exactly what happened. This is what Jesus said; this is what Mary heard; this is what Mary told; and therefore this is what John recorded. We have here not a fiction, but an accurate record of words spoken by Jesus after His resurrection.

Another incidental detail that is introduced in the Gospel narrative, and which is decisive proof of its historical accuracy, is found in John xix. 34. We are told that when one of the soldiers pierced the side of our crucified Lord with a spear, that straightway there came out blood and water. The reason of this we are not told. In fact, the writer could not have known the reason. There was no man on earth at the time who had sufficient knowledge of physiology to have told the reason. It was only centuries afterwards that the physiological reason was discovered. The distinguished medical authority, Dr. Simpson of Edinburgh University, the discoverer of chloroform, wrote

during his lifetime an able brochure, in which he showed on scientific grounds that Jesus Christ died from what is called in scientific language “extravasation of the blood,” or, in popular language, “a broken heart.” When one dies in this way the arms are thrown out (of course Jesus’ arms were already stretched out on the Cross), there is a loud cry (such as Jesus uttered, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”), “the blood escapes into the pericardium and prevents the heart from beating. There the blood stands for a short time, it separates into serum (the water) and clot (the red corpuscles, blood). When the soldier pierced the bag (pericardium) the blood and water flowed out.” This is the scientific explanation of the recorded fact, but John did not know this explanation. No one then living knew it, no one knew it for centuries afterwards. Is it conceivable that a writer in fabricating an account of events that never occurred should have made up and inserted a fact that has a strict scientific explanation, fitting precisely into the various facts recorded, but an explanation which neither he nor any one living at the time could possibly have known? How, then, does it come to be recorded in this way? Because this is precisely what occurred, and though John did not know the explanation, he observed the fact, and recorded the fact as observed, and left it for time and scientific discovery to conclusively demonstrate the historical accuracy of what he told. Beyond a peradventure we have here no fiction, but an exact record of something that occurred and was observed precisely as recorded. In my next address I will give you many more and more striking illustrations of the self-evident and indubitable truthfulness of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Christ.