

TALKS TO MEN

ABOUT THE BIBLE AND THE CHRIST OF THE BIBLE

BY

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SEVENTH TALK

THE CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

IN our last two addresses we have been considering some of the internal proofs of the truthfulness of the Gospel story. We started out without assuming anything. We took the four Gospels without assuming them to be true, or to have been written by the men whose names they bear, or to have been written in the first century, or second, or third. We assumed nothing whatever, but simply laid the Gospels side by side to see what we could learn from a consideration of the documents themselves as to whether they were the record of facts that actually occurred, or fictions. We first discovered that the four Gospels contained separate and independent accounts of the resurrection of Christ. We next saw that these Gospel stories must be either a record of facts that actually occurred, or else fiction; that if fiction, they must have been fabricated in one of two ways—either independently of one another, or in collusion with one another. We saw that they could not have been fabricated independently of one another, as the agreements were too marked and too many. We saw that they could not have been fabricated in collusion, the apparent discrepancies were too numerous and too noticeable. Not fabricated independently, not fabricated in collusion, we were therefore driven to the conclusion that they were not fabricated at all, but a true record of facts that actually occurred. We saw, in the next place, that each one of the four Gospels bore the clear marks of having been derived from eye-witnesses. We noted, in the next place, the artlessness, straightforwardness, and simplicity of the narratives; the entire absence of all attempt at colouring or effect—the certain mark of a true witness. We noted, in the next place, that it is often the case when a witness is on the witness stand that the unintentional evidence of words and phrases which he uses, and accidental details which he introduces, is more conclusive than the direct testimony of the witness, because it is not the testimony of the witness, but the testimony of the truth to itself. We then took up a large number of instances of this kind, conclusively showing that the Gospel stories could not have been made up; that beyond a peradventure they were the accurate representation of things that actually occurred.

Today we take up the circumstantial evidence for the resurrection of Christ. I presume you all know what is meant by circumstantial evidence. By circumstantial evidence we mean certain proven or admitted facts or circumstances which demand for their explanation the other fact which we are seeking to prove. For example, a man was once found murdered; the only clue to

the murderer was the point of a knife-blade which was found broken off in the heart. With this clue the detectives went to work. A knife was found with a broken blade. The jagged edges of the broken blade fitted exactly into the notches in the point that had been found in the heart. Moreover, there were traces of blood upon both point and blade, and the traces of blood on the point fitted exactly the traces of blood on the blade. It was held to be proven that the murder was committed with that knife. Take another illustration. A bolt of cloth was stolen from a certain manufacturer; search was made for the bolt of cloth. A bolt of cloth was found, which the manufacturer claimed was his stolen bolt; but the man in whose possession the bolt was found claimed that the bolt came from an entirely different factory. But when the bolt of cloth was taken to the factory from which the bolt had been stolen, the holes at each end of the bolt of cloth fitted exactly upon the tenterhooks of the factory from which it was alleged to have been stolen. But when it was taken to the factory from which the man claimed to have obtained it, it was found that the holes in the end of the bolt of cloth did not at all fit upon the tenterhooks of that factory. On this evidence it was held to be proven that the bolt of cloth had come from the factory where it fitted upon the tenter-hooks. There is abundant evidence of this character as to the certainty of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. There are certain proven and admitted facts that demand the resurrection of Christ to account for them.

(1) Beyond a question, the foundation truth preached in the early years of the Church's history was the resurrection. This was the one doctrine upon which the Apostles were ever ringing the changes. Whether Jesus did actually rise from the dead or not, it is certain that the one thing that the Apostles constantly proclaimed was that He had risen.

Why should the Apostles use this as the very corner-stone of their creed if not well attested and firmly believed. Furthermore, they laid down their lives for this doctrine. Men do not lay down their lives for a doctrine which they do not firmly believe. They stated that they had seen Jesus after His resurrection, and rather than give up their statement died for it. Of course, men may die for error, and often have; but in this case they would know whether they had seen Jesus or not, and they would not merely have been dying for error, but dying for a statement which they knew to be false. This is not credible. Furthermore, if the Apostles really firmly believed, as is admitted, that Jesus rose from the dead, they had some facts upon which they founded their belief. These are the facts they would have related in recounting the story, and not have made up a story out of imaginary incidents. But if the facts were as recounted in the Gospels, there is no possible escaping the conclusion that Jesus actually arose.

Furthermore, if Jesus had not arisen, there would have been some evidence that He had not. His enemies would have found this evidence. But the Apostles went up and down the very city where He had been crucified and proclaimed right to the face of the slayers that He had been raised, and no one could produce evidence to the contrary. The best they could do was to say the guards went to sleep and the disciples stole the body while the guards slept. Men who bear evidence to what happens while they are asleep are hardly credible witnesses. Further still, if the Apostles had stolen the body, they would have known it themselves, and would not have been ready to die for what they knew to be a fraud.

(2) Another known fact is the change in the day of rest. The early Church came from among the Jews. From time immemorial the Jews had celebrated the seventh day of the week as their day of rest and worship; but we find the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, and also in early Christian writings, assembling on the first day of the week. Nothing is harder than to change a holy day that has been celebrated for centuries, and is one of the most cherished customs of the people. What is especially significant about the change is that it was changed by no express decree, but by general consent. Something tremendous must have happened that led to this change. The Apostles asserted that what had happened on that day was the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and that is the most rational explanation, in fact, the only reasonable explanation of the change.

(3) But the most significant fact of all is the change in the disciples—the moral transformation. At the time of the crucifixion of Christ, we find the whole apostolic company filled with blank and utter despair. We see Peter, the leader of the apostolic company, denying his Lord three times with oaths and cursings. But a few days later we see this same man filled with a courage that nothing could shake. We see Peter standing before the very council that had condemned Jesus to death, and saying to them, “Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, doth this man stand before you whole” (Acts iv. 10). A little further on, when commanded by this council not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus, we hear Peter and John answering, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts iv. 19, 20). A little later still, after arrest and imprisonment, in peril of death, when sternly arraigned by the council, we hear Peter and the other Apostles answering their demand that they should be silent regarding Jesus, “We ought to obey God rather than man. The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, and we are His

witnesses of these things" (Acts v. 29, 32). Something tremendous must have happened to account for such a radical and astounding moral transformation as this. Nothing short of the fact of the resurrection, of their having seen the risen Lord, will explain it.

These unquestionable facts are so impressive and so conclusive that even infidel and Jewish scholars now admit that the Apostles believed that Jesus rose from the dead. Even Ferdinand Baur admits this. Even David Strauss says, "Only this much need be acknowledged, that the Apostles firmly believed that Jesus had arisen." Strauss evidently does not wish to admit any more than he has to, but he feels compelled to admit this much. Schenkel goes further yet, and says, "It is an indisputable fact that in the early morning of the first day of the week following the crucifixion, the grave of Jesus was found empty. It is a second fact that the disciples and other members of the apostolic communion were convinced that Jesus was seen after the crucifixion." These admissions are fatal to the rationalists who make them. The question at once arises, Whence this conviction and belief? Renan attempts an answer by saying that "the passion of a hallucinated woman (Mary) gives to the world a resurrected God" (Renans "Life of Jesus," p. 357). By this Renan means that Mary was in love with Jesus. After His crucifixion, brooding over it, in the passion of her love she dreamed herself into a condition where she had a hallucination that she had seen Jesus arisen from the dead; she reported her dream as fact, and thus the passion of a hallucinated woman gave to the world a resurrected God. But, we reply, the passion of a hallucinated woman was not competent to this task. Remember the make-up of the apostolic company. In the apostolic company were a Matthew and a Thomas to be convinced and a Saul outside to be converted. The passion of a hallucinated woman will not convince a stubborn unbeliever like Thomas, nor a Jewish tax-gatherer like Matthew. Who ever heard of a tax-gatherer, and, most of all, a Jewish tax-gatherer, who could be imposed upon by the passion of a hallucinated woman? Neither will the passion of a hallucinated woman convince a fierce and conscientious enemy like Saul of Tarsus? We must find some saner explanation than this.

Strauss tries to account for it by inquiring whether the appearances might not have been visionary. To this we reply that, first of all, there was no subjective starting-point for such visions. The Apostles, so far from expecting to see the Lord, would scarcely believe their own eyes when they did see Him. Furthermore, who ever heard of eleven men having the same vision at the same time, to say nothing of five hundred men (1 Cor. xv. 6) having the same vision at the same time? Strauss demands of us that we give up one miracle and substitute five hundred miracles in its place. Nothing can surpass the credulity of unbelief.

The third attempt at an explanation is that Jesus was not really dead when they took Him from the cross, that His friends worked over Him and brought Him back to life, and what was supposed to be the appearance of the risen Lord was the appearance of one who had never been really dead, but only apparently dead, and was now merely resuscitated. To sustain this view appeal has been made to the short time Jesus hung upon the cross, and to the fact that history tells us of one, in the time of Josephus, taken down from the cross and nursed back to life. But to this we answer, first, remember the events that preceded the crucifixion, the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, the awful ordeal of the four trials, the scourging, and the consequent physical condition in which all this left Jesus. Remember, too, the water and the blood that poured from the pierced side. In the second place, we reply, His enemies would have taken, and did take, all necessary precautions against such a thing as this happening (John xix. 34). We reply, in the third place, if Jesus had been merely resuscitated, He would have been so weak, such an utter physical wreck, that His reappearance would have been measured at its real value, and the moral transformation in the disciples, for which we are trying to account, would still remain unaccounted for. The officer in the time of Josephus, who is cited in proof, though brought back to life, was an utter physical wreck. We reply, in the fourth place, if brought back to life, the Apostles and friends of Jesus, who are the ones who are supposed to have brought Him back to life, would have known how they brought Him back to life, and that it was not a case of resurrection but of resuscitation, and the main fact to be accounted for, namely, the change in themselves would remain unaccounted for. The attempted explanation is an explanation that does not explain. We reply, in the fifth place, that the moral difficulty is the greatest of all. If it was merely a case of resuscitation, then Jesus tried to palm Himself off as one risen from the dead, when He was nothing of the sort; He was an arch impostor, and the whole Christian system rests on a fraud as its ultimate foundation. Is it possible to believe that such a system of religion as that of Jesus Christ, embodying such exalted precepts and principles of truth, purity, and love, "originated in a deliberately planned fraud." No one whose own heart is not cankered by fraud and trickery can believe Jesus to have been an impostor, and His religion to have been founded upon fraud.

We have eliminated all other possible suppositions. We have but one left, namely, Jesus really was raised from the dead the third day as is recorded in the Gospels. The desperate straits to which those who attempt to deny it are driven are themselves proof of the fact.

We have then several independent lines of argument pointing decisively to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Some of these taken separately prove the fact, but taken together they constitute an argument that makes

doubt of the resurrection of Christ impossible to the candid man. Of course, if one is determined not to believe, no amount of proof will convince. Such a man must be left to his own deliberate choice of error and falsehood, but any man who really desires to know the truth and is willing to obey it at any cost, must accept the resurrection of Christ as a historically proven fact.

There is really but one weighty objection to the doctrine that Christ arose from the dead, that is, that "there is no conclusive evidence that any other ever arose." To this a sufficient answer would be, even if it were certain that no other ever arose, it would not at all prove that Jesus did not rise; for the life of Jesus was unique, His nature was unique, His character was unique, His mission was unique, His history was unique, and it is not to be wondered at, but rather to be expected, that the issue of such a life should also be unique. After all, this objection is simply David Hume's exploded argument against the possibility of the miraculous revamped. According to this argument, no amount of evidence can prove a miracle, because miracles are contrary to all experience. But are miracles contrary to all experience? To start out by saying that they are is to beg the very question at issue. They may be outside of your experience and mine; they may be outside the experience of this entire generation, but your experience and mine and the experience of this entire generation is not all experience. Every student of geology and astronomy knows that things have occurred in the past which are entirely outside the experience of the present generation. Things have occurred within the last four years that are entirely outside the experience of the fifty years preceding. True science does not start out with an *a priori* hypothesis that certain things are impossible. It simply studies the evidence to know what has actually occurred. It does not twist its observed facts to make them accord with *a priori* theories, but seeks to make its theories accord with facts as observed. To say that miracles are impossible and that no amount of evidence can therefore prove a miracle is to be supremely unscientific. Within the past few years in the domain of chemistry, for example, discoveries have been made regarding radium which seemed to run counter to all previous observations regarding chemical elements and to well-established chemical theories, but the scientist has not therefore said that these discoveries about radium cannot be true. He has rather gone to work to find out where the trouble was in his previous theories. The observed and recorded facts in the case before us prove that Jesus rose from the dead, and true science must accept that conclusion and conform its theories to this observed fact.

In the day of the great triumph of Deism in England, two of the most brilliant men in the denial of the supernatural were the eminent legal authorities, Gilbert West and Lord Lyttelton. These two men, who were put forward to

crush the defenders of the supernatural in the Bible, had a conference together. One of them said to the other that it would be difficult to maintain their position unless they disposed of two of the alleged bulwarks of Christianity, namely, the alleged resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the alleged conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Lyttelton undertook to write a book to show that Saul of Tarsus was never converted as is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, but that his alleged conversion was a myth, if Gilbert West would write another book to show that the alleged resurrection of Christ from the dead was a myth. West said to Lyttelton, "I shall have to depend upon you for my facts, for I am somewhat rusty in the Bible," to which Lyttelton replied that he was counting upon West, for he too was somewhat rusty in the Bible. One of them said to the other, "If we are to be honest in the matter, we ought at least to study the evidence," and this they undertook to do. They had numerous conferences together while they were preparing their works. In one of these conferences West said to Lyttelton that there had been something on his mind for some time that he thought he ought to speak to him about, that as he had been studying the evidence, he was beginning to feel that there was something in it. Lyttelton replied that he was glad that he had spoken about it so, for he himself was somewhat shaken, as he had been studying the evidence for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Finally, when the books were finished the two men met. West said to Lyttelton, "Have you written your book?" He replied that he had, but he said, "West, as I have been studying the evidence and weighing it by the recognised laws of legal evidence, I have become satisfied that Saul of Tarsus was converted as is stated in the Acts of the Apostles, and that Christianity is true, and I have written my book on that side." The book can be found today in first-class libraries. "Well," said West, "as I have studied the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and have weighed it according to the acknowledged laws of evidence, I have become satisfied that Jesus really rose from the dead as recorded in the Gospels, and have written my book on that side." This book also can be found in our libraries today. Let any man of legal mind, any man who is accustomed and competent to weigh evidence, yes, any man with fair reasoning powers, and, above all, with perfect candour, sit down to the study of the facts regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and he will become satisfied that beyond a peradventure Jesus rose from the dead as is recorded in the Gospels. But suppose He did rise from the dead, what of it? We will take that question up in our next address.