

ALIVE

HOW *the* RESURRECTION *of* CHRIST
CHANGES EVERYTHING



GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER

“If Christ is not raised from the dead, then our faith is worthless (1 Cor. 15:14). However, Christ is risen and lives today! Surprisingly, few good books have been written on the vital subject of Christ’s resurrection, so Dr. Gabe Fluhrer’s work is all the more welcome. This gripping, well-written book argues from the Holy Scriptures and from careful reasoning that Christ’s resurrection is both true history and the ground of our hope both objectively and subjectively.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation
of Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Dr. Gabe Fluhrer upholds the historical faith of Christianity in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Its historical reality, for him, is the culmination of a much larger narrative, and its theological significance is inseparable from God’s redemptive plan since the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection of the dead are distinct episodes of the same event. From this perspective, Dr. Fluhrer examines and rejects the arguments raised by scholars against the physical resurrection of Jesus, explains the Old Testament promises that point to the resurrection, and shows how the resurrection was understood and applied by the New Testament authors. In addition to its apologetic character, this book has a pastoral and practical dimension, where it explores the implications of Christ’s resurrection for the lives of believers. In a time of skepticism like ours, this book comes as a ray of faith and hope in the central event of Christianity.”

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES
Founder, Living the Scriptures

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ sits at the very heart of the gospel. What does it mean that Jesus was raised from the dead? How do we know that the resurrection is true? How does the resurrection help me face death? How does the resurrection help me to live my life today? With the mind and heart of a pastor and theologian, Dr. Gabe Fluhrer deftly walks us through the Bible to see the centrality, beauty, and glory of the resurrection. Indeed, he rightly says, ‘For believers, the reality of Jesus’ resurrection means that everything has changed.’ Take up *Alive* and begin to see with fresh eyes what a difference the resurrection makes.”

—DR. GUY PRENTISS WATERS

James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament
Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Miss.

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GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

We have been told, over and over again, that life in the West has never been more secular. Pundits insist that what remains of our Christian heritage resembles the now-vacant cathedrals that haunt our urban centers or the fast-emptying rural churches sprinkled throughout the so-called flyover states: irrelevant, crumbling, and abandoned.

Despite this well-worn narrative, a closer look reveals that secularism's victory dance is premature. A strong argument could be (and has been) made that never before have we lived in a more spiritual age.¹ Modern man tolerates and even embraces the supernatural. From horoscopes to omens to fate to fascination with ghost stories to a vague deistic hope that the "big man upstairs" is looking out for us, the atheistic dream of a world shorn of belief in the sacred is dying more rapidly than the Christian worldview it sought to replace.

On a popular level, people remain stubbornly committed to the reality of a world beyond nature. Even the best efforts of a bloated and biased scientific establishment to disabuse them of such antiquated fantasies have not changed their minds.

But this entrenched commitment to the reality of the beyond

should not cause the Christian to rejoice. Rather, it should be a source of great sadness. Although Christians can celebrate the long-overdue rejection of the cold, hopeless, antisupernatural worldview of the atheistic establishment, they must simultaneously mourn the corresponding rise of the nebulous spiritualism of the present.

We must mourn this “spiritualism” because not all spiritualism is created equal. In other words, the supernatural world described by the Bible—in which God is sovereign—is not the same as horoscopes, fate, or deism.

The modern secularist may tolerate some form of spiritualism, at least in a general sense, but he will presumably never accept a supernaturalism that claims absolute authority over his life. In fact, as has been the case throughout the woeful history of our fallen race, the worldly mind will consistently take up arms against this kind of claim. It will march proudly into an ideological battle against any demand for its unqualified allegiance.

The resurrection of Christ represents just such a claim of absolute authority. As luminous as the first beams of sunshine that brightened Jerusalem the first Easter morning two thousand years ago, the light of Christ’s victory over the grave scatters the drowsy pagan gloom of the present. Jesus’ resurrection represents the highest sort of supernaturalism, but in a *supportive* fashion (more on this below).

By stating the matter this way, I am not at all claiming that the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus is thereby unimportant—far from it, as I will argue at length in what follows. It is of supreme importance. But the biblical writers did not share the skepticism of miracles that has anesthetized the West since

the Enlightenment. Therefore, they did not encounter the same hurdles to belief in the resurrection that might cause someone today to stumble.

For the writers of the New Testament, at least two astonishing, revolutionary, world-changing facts emerged from the empty tomb of Christ. First, according to the Apostles, the resurrection of Christ as a physical miracle in the space-time continuum was simply the culmination of a series of miraculous interventions by the Creator of the universe, going all the way back to the dawn of history. We will discuss this statement in more detail in chapter 2. For the moment, we only wish to point out that the *physical fact* of the resurrection was *supportive* of a far greater narrative. Therefore, in the second place, the God-intended *meaning* of the resurrection of Christ was paramount for the Apostles. The *historical reality* thus plays a supporting role to the *theological meaning* of that first Easter morning. Both, however, are indispensable: the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection and its theological meaning are inseparable and essential parts of God's redemptive plan.

Before proceeding, let me briefly discuss our terms. The resurrection refers, first and foremost, to the resurrection of Christ from the dead (see Matt. 28:1ff; Mark 16:1ff; Luke 24:1ff; John 20:1–10). The word can also refer to a more general event that will take place at the end of time, namely, the reunion of body and soul for all who have ever lived, for good or for ill (see Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:25–29). As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15:20, our Lord's victory over the grave was the "firstfruits" of a general resurrection harvest. His resurrection is thus the precursor to a more general, future occurrence.

In thinking about *resurrection*, the term *event* may be too

generic, resulting in an unhelpful ambiguity. As one scholar explains, Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of all people at the end of time should not be construed as two separate *events*. Rather, they are two *episodes* of the same event, even if they are separated by thousands of years.² Stated more simply, Christ's resurrection, as *the* resurrection, is the guarantor and beginning of *our* resurrection, to our everlasting delight or terror. Because these are distinct yet inseparable episodes,³ the firstfruits implies and guarantees the harvest. More on this in chapter 6.

With this in mind, we cannot think about the resurrection of Christ without also seeing the more general resurrection on the horizon. To deny one is to deny the other. To affirm one is to affirm the other. This book will focus primarily on Christ's resurrection.

In addition, the argument here is not that other religions or worldviews do not affirm a resurrection of some variety. There are a handful that do. But they are nothing like the biblical view. This is because, again, the resurrection of Christ as a *historical* reality has a deeply *theological* meaning, one that is incomprehensible apart from the worldview to which it is connected.

In what follows, I will begin by demonstrating the historical fact of Christ's bodily resurrection. This will occupy our attention in the first and second chapters. We will examine some objections raised by scholars who deny that Jesus rose from the grave. I think the resurrection of Christ is so well attested historically that the objections raised against it are persuasive only to those who have already made up their minds. In other words, the faith of those who reject the resurrection, while mistaken and misplaced, is every bit as firm as that of those who embrace the resurrection.

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The bulk of our study will concentrate on the biblical materials themselves. We will explore the promises and foreshadowings of Christ's resurrection in the Old Testament. Admittedly, the resurrection was only whispered to the saints who lived before Jesus' first coming. What was a whisper to those living under the old covenant becomes a deafening roar for the New Testament authors.

Accordingly, we will spend a few chapters exploring what the Gospels, the book of Acts, and the rest of the New Testament teach concerning Jesus' resurrection and therefore our resurrection. Finally, we will conclude by drawing some (I hope, practical and pastoral) conclusions regarding what the reality of resurrection means for our day-to-day lives.

My goal is for the reader to gain an appreciation for, a wonder at, and an enjoyment of the stupendous truth that sets Christianity apart from other world religions, namely, the reality that Jesus Christ is alive. Yes, as the Apostles' Creed confesses, He was buried. So were Muhammad, Buddha, and countless other religious leaders. But the next line of the ancient creed, simple in expression yet enormous in implication, is what I hope to expound, examine, and, most importantly, adore along with you in the pages that follow: "The third day he rose again from the dead."

One of the scholars whose arguments we will scrutinize in chapter 1 is Bart Ehrman, best-selling author and professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He fancies himself unshackled from the restrictive fundamentalism of his naive youth, and he wants the reader to join the agnostic exodus with him. Hence, he begins his popular-level books with his *deconversion* testimony. If he, as a secular intellectual, is permitted to do

that, then I will offer my conversion testimony without apology.

During my senior year at the University of South Carolina, I found myself in a familiar place for a soon-to-be college grad. As my undergraduate days drew to a close, I was unsure of what I believed, but I was certain that what I had labeled “fundamentalist Christianity” (which I have since come to understand was simply the historic Christian faith) was unworthy of being taken seriously by thinking people. Sure, we went to a mainline church growing up (who didn’t go to some kind of church in South Carolina?), but I had given myself to the study of philosophy. I read the great texts, tried to think critically, and shut myself up to the fact that I was on my own in the quest for truth.

Indeed, the very quest for *truth* with a definite article was something I needed to abandon as a mark of intellectual maturity. An inerrant book? The leftovers of a modernist, quasi-adolescent yearning for certitude. Better to live with ambiguity than sacrifice the intellect on the altar of a naive certainty. Only one way to heaven, through the blood sacrifice of Jesus? An arrogant, bigoted claim that is not only repulsive in its exclusivity but laughable to anyone who has lived outside the confines of a comfortable, Christian-influenced culture.

Rather, I had concluded that the world was a complicated, big place. I still believe this, perhaps more so since I became a Christian. However, I thought, exclusive claims like those I had heard from “fundamentalist” Christians could be dismissed safely.

Then, after I graduated, I began to examine some of the evidence for the resurrection because of a book I came across called *The Case for Christ*. In my arrogance, I argued that this was a book for a popular audience, not a scholarly work, so I could still keep

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it at arm's length. But the thinkers to whom Lee Strobel introduced me revealed a side of Christianity I had never encountered, both because of my ignorance and because of my own love of sin.

Strobel's book featured serious Christian scholarship presented at a popular level. So I read rebuttals to Strobel's work. And I continued reading Christian scholars who defended one doctrine on which I knew the whole system turned: the resurrection of Christ.

Like most students and graduates, I was agnostic about the miraculous. But the more I studied, the more I realized that if Jesus is alive (that is, if His resurrection is a historical fact), then I could no longer ignore Him. Therefore, I examined the evidence for the resurrection and Christianity with something of a single-minded devotion. I looked at different denominations. I spoke with whomever I could about my questions. I read and reread, all the while making notes in the margins.

Two things happened during this time, both unforgettable to me. First, I was overwhelmed by the evidence for Christ's resurrection. I realized that my bias toward the miraculous was just that: a bias, not a solid argument. As we will see in chapter 1, I have since come to realize that, despite the hand waving and posturing of the scholarly establishment, an unwarranted antisupernatural bias infects academia.

But once that bias was overcome, one fact became as plain as the fall sunlight that warmed my neck as I studied: the resurrection of Christ happened. It wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't the deepest spiritual longings of man realized in some sort of "Easter event," as some biblical scholars in the twentieth century argued. It was real.

I was ruined. If the resurrection was true, and I had come to see that it was, then the skepticism of my college years was unfounded. But I wasn't ready to commit myself wholeheartedly to Christ yet.

So, in the second place, I began to listen to Dr. R.C. Sproul's radio program *Renewing Your Mind*. I had no idea what the Reformed faith was; I had just started to believe that miracles like the resurrection could happen. But I listened to Dr. Sproul every morning in my old truck tooling around the Upcountry of South Carolina.

He explained the gospel to me, not in broad strokes but in specifics that at once both wounded and cured my soul. What was a vague ache of conscience crystallized into radical depravity. I knew that I was enslaved to desires and habits and that I was, in sum, in rebellion against the living and true God.

At that point, it all came together for me. Jesus is alive, but I was dead in my trespasses and sins. The only hope I had was for the living Jesus to save my soul by His sheer grace. Dr. Sproul explained that this grace I desperately wanted is precisely what Jesus offers. I went from ruined to reconciled by God's grace alone!

I was newborn in the faith, and everything looked different. I had tasted a wonder that I had never known. To be sure, my understanding was dim. I had a lot of questions. But something had changed. I wanted to read the Bible. I wanted to know more about Jesus. So I sought out pastors who believed the Bible and asked them to study God's Word with me. I logged on to Ligonier's website constantly. And I continued to study the resurrection.

Now, almost seventeen years later, I have had the faith of my early twenties challenged, both in the mundane affairs of daily life

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and in the unsympathetic courts of academic work. I've buried loved ones and heard the spade scattering dirt on some of my dreams as well. I am a husband and father and pastor, and I've been astonished at my incapacity and ineptitude in all three.

In a word, life—in all its beauty and knotted ugliness—has happened. But the radiance of the resurrection faith I came to believe in almost two decades ago has lost none of its luster. Indeed, as I enter middle age, it becomes more precious to me daily. Therefore, this book is not simply a detached study of evidence and exegesis. It is an act of worship by a grateful sinner who, by God's grace alone, believes that Jesus was buried but is now alive. And because of that simple yet beautiful historical fact, nothing will ever be the same for any of us.



Chapter One

A FOOL'S ERRAND?

KNOWING THE TRUTH OF THE RESURRECTION IN AN AGE OF UNBELIEF

The American industrialist Henry Ford was known for his quick wit. One of his more memorable statements was “History is bunk.” I suppose if your life’s work changes the world, your witticisms get less scrutiny. In contrast to Ford’s skepticism, Christianity has as one of its outstanding features its intractable commitment to history. Far from considering the past “bunk,” the Bible prioritizes history. On every page, we read the evidence of the Spirit-inspired writers using careful documentation when they described historical events.

The resurrection of Christ from the dead is one of these historical events. As we will observe in later chapters, the Apostles never once imply that Jesus’ resurrection was anything other than a historical fact. It was not a metaphor or a symbol. It was not

a mass hallucination. Yet, despite the Bible's teaching that Jesus actually rose from the dead, skeptics insist it didn't happen.

But this kind of doubt is nothing new. In fact, the first skeptics of the resurrection were contemporaries of Jesus and the Apostles. Matthew records an agreement between the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers who were charged with guarding Jesus' tomb that, for a tidy sum, the guards would tell everyone that the disciples stole Jesus' body (Matt. 28:11–15). The folded graveclothes of Jesus had barely been creased when unbelief reared its cynical head.

Therefore, in this chapter, I have three goals. First, I critique the philosophical bias against the supernatural that dominates objections to the resurrection. This bias assumes certain principles that do not disprove the resurrection but reject the idea of such an event ahead of time. These assumptions, however, are fatal to this bias. Second, I look at some alternative theories put forward to explain (or better, to explain *away*) the reality of the empty tomb. Finally, I analyze and answer the arguments of two prominent scholars who are hostile to the resurrection.

THE FAITH OF DOUBT

When we moved to Mississippi, we were invited to a dinner party, which eventually turned into a supper club with dear friends. At our first meeting, we asked each other the usual get-to-know-you questions: where we were from, where we went to college, how we met our spouse, and other such pleasantries. Eventually, one of the guests asked me, "What did you study in college, Gabe?" I answered, "I did my undergraduate degree in philosophy." After a puzzled look, she responded, "Do they still have those?" I suspect

many people share the viewpoint of my friend. Studying philosophy seems quaint, if not eccentric. The very mention of the word *philosophy* conjures images of long beards, obtuse arguments, and irresolvable debate.

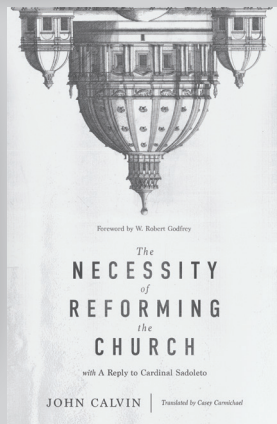
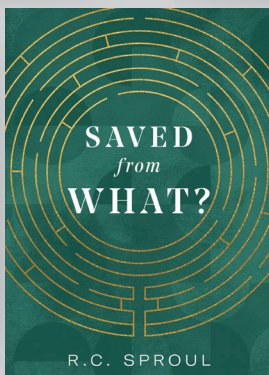
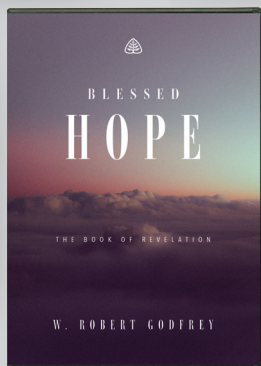
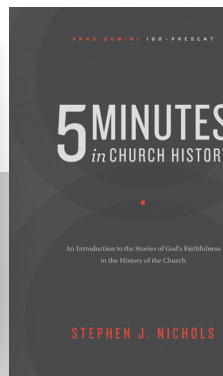
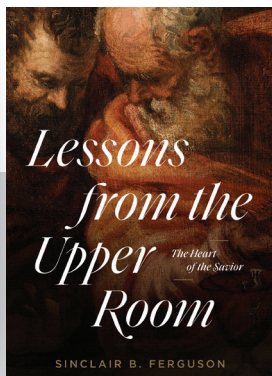
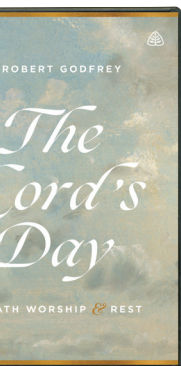
But everyone is a philosopher, believe it or not. Philosophy is more or less asking and answering the most foundational questions of life. For example, queries like “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of life?” “Why should I do this rather than that?” “What is true?” and “Why do LEGOs always seem to be in my path when I get up at night?” dominate philosophical speculation (especially the last one). And although we may not be professional philosophers, we are doing philosophy every time we think about matters like these. Therefore, the issue is not *whether* we will do philosophy but *how* we will do it.

Unfortunately, arguments against the resurrection display a lot of poor reasoning. In the face of overwhelming evidence that Jesus rose from the dead (evidence that we will explore later), why do so many people nevertheless reject its truth?

First and foremost, we reject God’s truth because Satan has blinded our eyes (2 Cor. 4:4). Satan does this in various ways, but one common tactic is false philosophy through which the evidence is sifted. Such theorizing begins with the assumption that the human mind is competent to solve life’s problems. In other words, this view rejects *at the outset* the need for divine revelation to think correctly. It rebels against the uniform testimony of the Bible that for man’s mind to function as God intended, it must bow the knee to His Word. In sum, bad philosophy discards God’s Word in favor of its own supremacy.

When we approach objections to Jesus’ rising from the dead

We want to see men and women around the world connect
the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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