

# How the Resurrection Changed (and Continues to Change) Everything

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June 10, 2022



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By the First Century, Rome had conquered a vast region of the known world, from modern-day Portugal on the west, to what we now call Iran and Iraq on the east. Rome controlled the largest portion of what would become Great Britain at the northern tip of the Empire and portions of modern Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt on the southern edge. At its peak, 60 to 70 *million* people lived under Roman rule, and they worshipped a vast array of mythical gods.

Rome's early governing strategy was simple: allow each conquered people group to retain their gods so long as these deities were assimilated into the pantheon of Roman gods. Mythical deities were popular at this point in history, including Mithras, Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Heracles, Dionysus, and Serapis. You may be familiar with some of these gods, but if you are, it's probably because you've read about them in an *ancient history class*. None of them are worshipped today.

One of the gods worshipped in First Century Rome, however, quickly surpassed (or replaced) all the rest. He was an unlikely candidate for global transformation, born in a tiny, irrelevant town and raised in an insignificant village. He walked from one place to the next, and as an adult never traveled more than two hundred miles from the town where he was born. The locals suspected he was an illegitimate son, and his mother and father were poor peasants. He didn't receive an expensive education, never married, never had children, and never owned a home of his own. He only appeared for a short time before

public opinion turned against him and most of his followers abandoned, betrayed or denied him. He was rejected by the religious, hunted by the powerful, mocked and unjustly persecuted by his enemies. He suffered an unfair trial, was publicly humiliated, brutally beaten, and unduly executed in the most horrific way. Even then, the few followers who remained had to borrow a grave to bury him.

Yet this man – *Jesus of Nazareth* – changed history, introduced the Common Era, and forever transformed the most important and revered aspects of human culture. He is still worshipped today, while the vast majority of First Century gods are long forgotten. How is this possible? What differentiated Jesus from all the other gods worshipped in the Roman Empire? It's simple: Jesus rose from the grave and was observed by eyewitnesses following His resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is *true*. It can be confirmed by *direct evidence*: the testimony of eyewitnesses. The worshippers of Mithras, Osiris, Attis and others placed their trust in ancient mythologies based on folklores rather than verifiable, recorded history. Those who observed the resurrection of Jesus, on the other hand (over 100 gathered following His ascension<sup>[1]</sup> and 500 were still available to the readers of Paul's letter to the Corinthians<sup>[2]</sup>), testified about Jesus based on their own firsthand *observations*.

The evidential nature of Christianity provided it with a unique advantage. The Resurrection, locked in the timeline of history and documented by eyewitnesses, distinguished Christianity from every other First Century religious claim in the Roman Empire.

Fast forward to 1996 AD. Jesus was still being worshipped in the region of the ancient Roman Empire, and he was also being celebrated in territories as far away as Southern California. That's where I learned about him. I was thirty-five at the time, a committed atheist, and a detective. I found myself in a church service, sitting dutifully with my wife. The pastor that day described Jesus as "the smartest man who ever lived." I was provoked enough to buy a bible to see what was so smart about this ancient sage. *That* led me to the gospels. As I read them, I began to recognize characteristics of eyewitness testimony, given that I had interviewed *hundreds* of witnesses by that time in my career.

Was the story about Jesus *true*? I decided to test the gospel authors by asking the same four questions I would typically ask of any eyewitness in a criminal investigation. Were these authors really present to see what they said they saw? Could their claims be corroborated in some way? Were they consistent or did their story about Jesus change over time? Were they motivated to lie? For the next 6 to 8 months, I investigated the death and resurrection of Jesus like the many cold cases I've solved over the years.

I discovered that the gospels were written early enough to have been penned by authors who had access to true eyewitnesses. Luke's *Book of Acts*, for example, lacks any description of the destruction of the Jewish Temple (in 70AD), the Roman siege of Jerusalem (in the late 60's), the death of Peter or Paul (between 64-65AD), or the death of James, the brother of Jesus (in 62AD). These omissions are reasonable if Luke wrote

this New Testament book *prior* to 62AD, and if so, he would already have completed the Gospel bearing his name[3]. Paul must have had access to this Gospel written by his friend, as he quoted from it in his letter to the Corinthians,[4] written in the mid-50's AD. That places the authorship of Luke between 50-55AD. Mark's Gospel (quoted repeatedly by Luke) was clearly written earlier and available to Luke as a resource. Both Gospels were penned early enough to have been constructed from true eyewitness accounts (as Luke declares in the opening lines of his Gospel) and "fact-checked" by those who were living at the time.

I also discovered that the gospel accounts could be *corroborated* in several ways, including archeology. Historical figures such as Pontius Pilate (Matthews 27:2), Erastus (Romans 16:23), Sergius Paulus (Acts 13), and many more have been verified and confirmed by archeological discoveries. The Gospel authors also accurately described the cities and geography of the region, the popular names for men and women at the time, and the correct governmental processes and procedures employed by the Jews and the Romans. The authors even documented these truths using a form of Greek that was popular in the region in the First Century.[5]

The claims of the Gospel authors were also *preserved over time*. My experience documenting the "chain of custody" for any piece of evidence in a criminal trial helped me to trace the claims of the New Testament authors over the centuries. The students of the apostle John, for example (Ignatius, Papias, and Polycarp), reiterate John's claims without any modification. Ignatius and Polycarp then repeated the Gospel claims faithfully to their student, Irenaeus, without altering them. As I examined the ancient letters of these church fathers, I discovered that the truth about Jesus could be reconstructed from their letters to one another and to local congregations. The facts about Jesus were never altered along the way.

Finally, I investigated the *motives* of the gospel authors. My experience investigating homicides taught me that there are only three reasons why anyone commits a murder, and these are the same three reasons why people lie: financial greed, sexual desire, and the pursuit of power.[6] As I examined the lives of the Gospel authors, I found that none of them had anything to gain in any of these areas. Christians in the first three centuries (prior to the Roman Edict of Milan), *suffered* for their commitment to Jesus. Christians were *persecuted* during this time. Many lost their possessions, their standing within their family and community, or their *lives*. If the claims related to Jesus were untrue, they would have been the most dangerous untruths anyone could utter.

The Gospel authors *passed* the four-part test I typically applied to eyewitnesses in my criminal cases. Their gospels reliably and accurately described the resurrection of Jesus without ulterior motive. When I realized this was the case, everything changed for me. I'm inclined to assign a higher level of authority to people who have demonstrated their Divinity by *rising from the grave*. I re-read the words of Jesus from a new perspective, and once I realized the New Testament was telling the truth about *Him*, I started to pay close attention to what it was saying... about *me*. It accurately described *Jesus as God incarnate* with the power to forgive sins and shoulder the cost of human rebellion. It

accurately described *me* as a fallen, defiant sinner in need of *that* kind of Savior. The gospels reliably and accurately described the resurrection of Jesus without ulterior motive. Click To Tweet

Jesus still answers that need today. Our imperfection separates us from a perfect God, but our remedy can be found in Jesus, if we decide to accept Him. Jesus is the uniquely sinless, perfect man who proved His Deity, confirmed his authority, inaugurated the “Common Era”, and changed human history by *rising from the grave*. He’s changed millions of lives along the way. If you’re ready to make a decision for Him, He can change *yours* as well.

This article was first posted at Decision Magazine.

[1] as recorded in Acts 1:15

[2] as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:6

[3] Refer to Acts 1:1-2

[4] Paul quotes Luke 22:19–20 in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8

[5] For more information, refer to *Cold-Case Christianity*, Chapter 12.

[6] I later discovered that the Apostle John had already described these motives in 1 John 2:16

Written By J. Warner Wallace

J. Warner Wallace is a Dateline featured cold-case homicide detective, popular national speaker and best-selling author. He continues to consult on cold-case investigations while serving as a Senior Fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview. He is also an Adj. Professor of Christian Apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and a faculty member at Summit Ministries. He holds a BA in Design (from CSULB), an MA in Architecture (from UCLA), and an MA in Theological Studies (from Gateway Seminary).



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