

The Case for Christianity

Part I

Dr. Stanford E. Murrell

Sovereign Grace Baptist Church

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1 Corinthians 15:1-19

The Doctrine of the Resurrection has always been felt to be a vital part of the faith in Christianity. As a consequence, the most sever opponents have ultimately concentrated their attacks, and Christians have centered their defense, upon it. The subject of the resurrection is therefore of the utmost importance. There are several converging lines of evidence proving the resurrection as it appears in the New Testament, and none can be overlooked. Each must have its place and weight. The issues at stake are so serious that nothing must be omitted. Consider then the Case for Christianity.

First Proof: The Life of Jesus: The first proof is the life of Jesus Christ Himself. It is always a disappointment when a life, which commenced well, finishes badly. We have this feeling even in fiction; instinct demands that a story should end well. Much more is this true of Jesus Christ. A perfect life characterized by divine claims ends in its prime in a cruel and shameful death. Is that a fitting close? Surely death could not end everything after such a noble career.

The Gospels give the resurrection as the completion of the picture of Jesus Christ. There is no real doubt that Christ anticipated His own resurrection. At first He used only vague terms, such as, "*Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" But later on He spoke plainly, and whenever He mentioned His death, He added, "*The Son of man must be raised the third day.*" These references are too numerous to be overlooked, and, in spite of difficulties of detail, they are, in any proper treatment of the Gospels, an integral part of the claim made for Himself by Jesus Christ (Matt 12:38-40; 16:21; 17:9,23; 20:19; 27:63; Mark 8:31; 9:9,31; 10:34; 14:58; Luke 9:22; 18:33; John 2:19-21).

The veracity of Christ is at stake if He did not rise. Surely the word of such a One must be given due credence. We are therefore compelled to face the fact that the resurrection of which the Gospels speak is the resurrection of no ordinary man, but of Jesus—that is of One whose life and character had been unique, and for whose shameful death no proper explanation was conceivable (Denhey, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 122 f).

Consider, too, the death of Christ in the light of His perfect life. If that death was the close of a life so beautiful, so remarkable, so Godlike, we are faced with an insoluble mystery—the permanent triumph of wrong over right, and the impossibility of believing in truth or justice in the world (C.H. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 36). That is a concept too horrible to contemplate.

Second Proof: The Empty Grave: Another line of proof is the fact of the empty grave and the disappearance of the body. That Jesus died and was buried, and that on the third morning the tomb was empty, is not now seriously challenged. The theory of a swoon and a recovery in the tomb is impossible. The Roman soldiers who crucified Christ had stared death in the face too often. They would never have allowed the body to be taken from the Cross unless Christ was dead.

Moreover, at Christ's burial a stone was rolled before the tomb, the tomb was sealed, and a guard was placed before it. Yet on the third morning the body had disappeared, and the tomb was empty. There are only two alternatives.

- His body must have been taken out of the grave by human hands
- or else by superhuman power.

If the hands were human, they must have been those of His friends or of His foes. If His friends had wished to take out His body, the question at once arises whether they could have done so in the face of the stone, the seal and the guard.

If His foes had contemplated this action, the question arises whether they would seriously have considered it. It is extremely improbable that any effort should have been made to remove the body out of the reach of the disciples. Why should His enemies do the very thing that would be most likely to spread the report of His resurrection? As Chrysostom said, *"If the body had been stolen, they could not have stolen it naked, because of the delay in stripping it of the burial clothes and the*

trouble caused by the drugs adhering to it" (quoted in Day, *Evidence for the Resurrection*, 35).

Besides, the position of the grave-clothes proves the impossibility of the theft of the body for they were neatly folded and laid to one side. Who could have done that? Who would have done that?

How, too, is it possible to account for the failure of the Jews to disprove the resurrection? Not more than seven weeks afterward Peter preached in that city the fact that Jesus had been raised. What would have been easier or more conclusive than for the Jews to have produced the dead body and silenced Peter forever? "The silence of the Jews is as significant as the speech of the Christians" (Fairbairn, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, 357).

The fact of the empty tomb with the disappearance of the body remains a problem to be faced. It is now admitted that the evidence for the empty tomb is adequate, and that it was part of the basic belief of the first century. It is important to realize the force of this admission, because it is a testimony to Paul's use of the term "third day" and to the Christian observance of the first day of the week. And yet in spite of this we are told that a belief in the empty tomb is impossible.

By some writers the idea of resurrection is interpreted to mean the revival of Christ's spiritual influence on the disciples, which had been brought to a close by His death. It is thought that the essential idea and value of Christ's resurrection can be

conserved, even while the belief in His bodily rising from the grave is surrendered (Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 23). But how can we believe in the resurrection while we regard the basis of the original belief in it as a mistake, not to say a fraud? The disciples found the tomb empty, and on the strength of this they believed He had risen. How can the belief in a resurrection be true if the foundation be false?

There is something else. The various forms of the Vision-Theory are now gradually but surely being regarded as inadequate and impossible. They involve the change of almost every fact in the Gospel history, and the invention of new scenes and conditions of which the Gospels know nothing. It has never been satisfactorily shown why the disciples should have had this abundant experience of visions; nor why they should have had it so soon after the death of Christ and within a strictly limited period; or why it suddenly ceased.

The disciples were familiar with the apparition of a spirit, like Samuel's, and with the resuscitation of a body, like Lazarus', but what they had not experienced or imagined was the fact of a spiritual body, the combination of body and spirit in an entirely novel way. So the old theory of a vision is now virtually set aside, and for it is substituted the theory of a real spiritual manifestation of the risen Christ.

The question at once arises whether this is not prompted by an unconscious but real desire to get rid of anything like a physical resurrection. Whatever may be true of unbelievers, this is an impossible position for those who believe Christ is alive.

In view of the records of the Gospels and the general testimony of the New Testament, it is impossible to be "agnostic" as to what happened at the grave of Jesus, even though we are quite sure that He who died now lives and reigns. It is sometimes said that faith is not bound up with, holding a particular view of the relations of Christ's present glory with the body that was once in Joseph's tomb, that faith is to be exercised in the exalted Lord, and that belief in a resuscitation of the human body is no vital part of it.

It is no doubt true that faith today is to be exercised solely in the exalted and glorified Lord, but faith must ultimately rest on fact, and it is difficult to understand how Christian faith can really be "agnostic" with regard to the facts about the empty tomb and the risen body, which are so prominent in the New Testament, and which form an essential part of the apostolic witness.

The attempt to set faith and historical evidence in opposition to each other, will never satisfy general Christian intelligence. If there is to be any real belief in the historical character of the New Testament, it is impossible to be "agnostic" about facts that are written so large on the face of the records.

When once the evidence for the empty tomb is allowed to be adequate, the impossibility of any other explanation than that indicated in the New Testament is at once seen. The evidence must be accounted for and adequately explained.

And so we come again to the insurmountable barrier of the empty tomb, which, together with the apostolic witness, stands impregnable against all the attacks of visional and apparitional theories. It is becoming more evident that these theories are entirely inadequate to account for the records in the Gospels, as well as for the place and power of those Gospels in the early church and in all subsequent ages.

It has been suggested that resurrection means a real objective appearance of the risen Christ without implying any physical reanimation, that the *"resurrection of Christ was an objective reality, but was not a physical resuscitation"* (C.H. Robinson, *Studies in the Resurrection of Christ*, 12). But the difficulty here is as to the meaning of the term "resurrection." If it means a return from the dead, a rising again (re-), must there not have been some identity between that which was put in the tomb and the "objective reality" which appeared to the disciples? Wherein lies the essential difference between an objective vision and an objective appearance?

If we believe the apostolic testimony to the empty tomb, why may we not accept their evidence to the actual resurrection? They evidently recognized their Master, and this recognition must have been due to some familiarity with His bodily appearance.

No difficulty of conceiving of the resurrection of mankind hereafter must be allowed to set aside the plain facts of the record about Christ. It is, of course, quite clear that the resurrection body of Jesus was not exactly the same as when it was put

in the tomb, but it is equally clear that there was definite identity as well as definite dissimilarity, and both elements must be faced and accounted for.

There need be no insuperable difficulty if we believe that in the very nature of things Christ's resurrection must be unique, and, since the life and work of Jesus Christ transcend our experience (as they certainly should do), we must not expect to bring them within the limitations of natural law and human history. How the resurrection body was sustained is a problem quite outside our ken, though the reference to "*flesh and bones*," compared with Paul's words about "flesh and blood" not being able to enter the kingdom of God, may suggest that while the resurrection body was not constituted upon a natural basis through blood, yet that it *possessed "all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature"* (Church of England Article IV).

We may not be able to solve the problem, but we must hold fast to all the facts, and these may be summed up by saying that the body was the same though different, different though the same. The true description of the resurrection seems to be that "*it was an objective reality, but, that it was not merely a physical resuscitation.*"

We are therefore brought back to a consideration of the facts recorded in the Gospels as to the empty tomb and the disappearance of the body, and we only ask for an explanation which will take into consideration all the facts recorded, and will do no violence to any part of the evidence. To predicate a new resurrection body in

which Christ appeared to His disciples does not explain how in three days' time the body which had been placed in the tomb was disposed of. Does not this theory demand a new miracle of its own (Kennett, Interpreter, V, 271)?

Third Proof: Transformation of the Disciples: The next line of proof to be considered is the transformation of the disciples caused by the resurrection. They had seen their Master die, and through that death they lost all hope. Yet hope returned three days after.

On the day of the crucifixion they were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty. When the message of the resurrection first came they were incredulous and hard to be convinced, but when once they became assured they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time?

- The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits and characters.
- Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which should so affect them. Time is needed for a process of legendary growth.
- There is nothing more striking in the history of primitive Christianity than this marvelous change wrought in the disciples by a belief in the resurrection of their Master. It is a psychological fact that demands a full explanation. The disciples were prepared to believe in the appearance of a spirit, but they never contemplated the possibility of a resurrection (see Mark 16:11). Men do not imagine what they do not believe, and the women's intention to embalm a corpse shows they did not expect His resurrection.

- Besides, a hallucination involving five hundred people at once, and repeated several times during forty days, is unthinkable.

Fourth Proof: Existence of the Primitive Church: From this fact of the transformation of personal life in so incredibly short a space of time, we proceed to the next line of proof, the existence of the primitive church. *"There is no doubt that the church of the apostles believed in the resurrection of their Lord"* (Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, 74).

It is now admitted on all hands that the church of Christ came into existence as the result of a belief in the resurrection of Christ. When we consider its commencement, as recorded in the *Book of the Acts* of the Apostles, we see two simple and incontrovertible facts:

- the Christian society was gathered together by preaching;
- the substance of the preaching was the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was put to death on a cross, and would therefore be rejected by Jews as accursed of God (Deut 21:23). Yet multitudes of Jews were led to worship Him (Acts 2:41), and a great company of priests to obey Him (Acts 6:7). The only explanation of these facts is God's act of resurrection (Acts 2:36), for nothing short of it could have led to the Jewish acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Messiah. The apostolic church is thus a result of a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The

early chapters of Acts bear the marks of primitive documents, and their evidence is unmistakable.

It is impossible to allege that the early church did not know its own history, that myths and legends quickly grew up and were eagerly received, and that the writers of the Gospels had no conscience for principle, but manipulated their material at will, for any modern church could easily give an account of its history for the past fifty years or more (Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 144). And it is simply absurd to think that the earliest church had no such capability. In reality there was nothing vague or intangible about the testimony borne by the apostles and other members of the church. "*As the church is too holy for a foundation of rottenness, so she is too real for a foundation of mist*" (Archbishop Alexander, *The Great Question*, 10).

If Easter be not true,
Then all the lilies low must lie;
The Flanders poppies fade and die;
The spring must lose her fairest bloom
For Christ were still within the tomb—
If Easter be not true.

If Easter be not true,
Then faith must mount on broken wings;
Then hope no more immortal spring;
Then love must lose her might urge;
Life prove a phantom, death a dirge—
If Easter be not true.

If Easter be not true.
'Twere foolishness the cross to bear;
He died in vain Who suffered there;
What matter though we laugh or cry,

Be good or evil, live or die,
If Easter be not true?

If Easter be not true—
But it is true, and Christ is risen!
And mortal spirit from its prison
Of sin and death with Him may rise!
Worth while the struggle, sure the prize,
Since Easter, aye, is true!

~*~

Henry H. Barstow

The Case for Christianity

Part II

Sovereign Grace Baptist Church

May 7, 2000

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Fifth Proof: The Witness of Paul: One man in the apostolic church must be singled out as a special witness to the resurrection. The conversion and work of Saul of Tarsus is our next line of proof for the resurrection of Christ. As a member of the Sanhedrian, as a Pharisee of the Pharisees, Saul was hostile to Christ—until he met the Majestic Master and his heart was changed (Acts 9). He who persecuted the faith began to preach and then to publish the gospel abroad through the power of the pen for all men to read.

Some years ago an article appeared (E. Medley, *The Expositor*, V, iv, 359) which raised an interesting rhetorical question as to what might be suggested to the mind of a non Christian who examined Paul's earliest writing (1 Thessalonians). It was concluded that two points at least would stand out clearly—that Jesus Christ was killed (2:15) and that He was raised from the dead (4:14).

- 1 Thessalonians 2:15 *Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:*
- 1 Thessalonians 4:14 *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.*

Because First Thessalonians is usually dated about 51 AD—which is only about 22 years after the resurrection—there is force in this testimony. Had the resurrection not taken place, Paul's writings would have been challenged from the outset. But they were not challenged.

A few years later, in another epistle, there is a much fuller reference to the most glorious of all events which is the resurrection of the dead. Christ had taught this same concept. Jesus said in John 5:28-29 *Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29 And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.*

In the well-known chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle is concerned to prove the resurrection of **all** Christians in particular. Paul naturally points to the resurrection of Christ as his greatest evidence that one-day all the graves will split open and men shall live again.

To argue his case Paul provides a list of the various appearances of Christ, ending with one to himself 1 Corinthians 15:5-7. *And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: 6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. 7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. : Last of all he was seen of me also, as one born out of due time."*

“Many people have seen the resurrected Christ,” said Paul. “And I have seen him too.”

*Christ the Lord is risen today,
Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say
Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high;
Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply,
Alleluia!*

~*~

Charles Wesley

It is essential to give special attention to the nature and precise wording of Paul’s testimony. Listen again as he writes to the church of Corinth. *“I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures”* (1 Cor 15:3 f). With these words Paul is affirming that *“within 5 years of the crucifixion of Jesus he was taught that `Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures' ”* (Kennett, *Interpreter*, V, 267).

If we seek to appreciate the full importance of this testimony we have a right to draw the conclusion *"That within a very few years of the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was, in the mind of at least one man of education, absolutely irrefutable"* (Kennett, op.cit., V, 267).

Now notice next that Paul's narrative includes one small but significant statement that reflects a very definite feature of the Gospel story—the mention of *"the third day"* (1 Cor. 15:4). When Jesus spoke of His resurrection the time element was very prominent.

- Matthew 12:38-40 *Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. 39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*
- Matthew 16:21 *From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.*
- Matthew 17:23 *And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry.*
- Matthew 20:19 *And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.*
- Matthew 27:63 *Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.*

It is obvious that when Christ taught about the resurrection He spoke of the third day and when His enemies spoke of the same event they mentioned the time element of the third day. And Paul spoke of it in His writings. Why? The answer is simply this. Paul believed the story of the empty tomb.

- At a date when the recollection was fresh,
- when he could examine all the evidence for himself,
- when he could make the fullest possible inquiry of others,
- and when the fears and opposition of enemies would have made it impossible for the adherents of Jesus Christ to make any statement that was not absolutely true Paul believed in the story of the resurrection.

"Surely common sense requires us to believe that that for which he so suffered was in his eyes established beyond the possibility of doubt" (Kennett, op. cit., V, 271).

In view, therefore,

- of Paul's personal testimony to his own conversion,
- of his interviews with those who had seen Jesus Christ on earth before and after His resurrection,
- of the prominence given to the resurrection in the apostle's own teaching,

the Church today may challenge afresh any attempts to disprove the resurrection.

Sixth Proof: The Gospel Record: The next line of proof of the resurrection is the record in the Gospels of the appearances of the risen Christ. By some defenders of the faith this argument is set forth first but it should go last and for this reason. The Christian church believed in the resurrection for many years *before* the Gospels were written. Therefore, it is impossible for the Gospel records to be the church's primary and most important evidence, but they are important.

According to the Gospel narratives there are two sets of appearances, one in Jerusalem and the other in Galilee. While we cannot examine each appearance in detail, it is profitable to call attention to two of them.

- The first is the story of the walk to Emmaus as set forth in Luke 24:13-33.
- The second is the visit of Peter and John to the tomb John 20:1-10.

It is impossible to read these narratives and not be convinced of the literal truthfulness of the resurrection. Either the resurrection is true or Luke was “*a greater poet, a more creative genius, than Shakespeare.*” (Bishop Moule, *Meditations for the Church's Year*, 108).

In both narratives there is the uniform testimony to the two facts:

- the empty grave,
- the appearances of Christ on the third day.

Summary and Conclusion: When we examine carefully all the converging lines of evidence, when we endeavor to give weight to all the facts of the case, it seems impossible to escape the truth that a physical miracle of a resurrection took place 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. It was this miracle which the apostles believed in—and for which they died.

Tragically, much present-day thought refuses to accept the miraculous. Scientific doctrines [such as the uniformity and continuity of Nature] bar the way of religious belief for many by contending that miracles are impossible. And even within the professing Church are told that they are not required to believe in the reanimation of a dead body.

One reason for such blatant unbelief is failure to comprehend that God can make new things. The Christian faith teaches that Christ Himself was a "*new thing*," (Luke 1:35) and that His coming as "*God manifest in the flesh*" (1 Tim. 3:16) was something absolutely unique. Why then, are we surprised to discover that one day there will be a new body, physical but spiritual and suited for eternity?

Here is the conclusion of the matter. The bodily resurrection of Christ proves to be no difficulty when the believer is willing to let God be God—a sovereign Worker of miracles.

Theology of the Resurrection: The theology of the resurrection is very important in light of the prominence given to it in the New Testament.

- **The resurrection is important as evidence of the validity of the work of Christ at Calvary.** The resurrection is the proof of the atoning character of the death of Christ, and of His Deity and divine exaltation.

Romans 1:4 *4 And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:*

- **The resurrection is important in evangelistic efforts.** The New Testament Church included testimony to the resurrection as one of its characteristic features, thereby proving to the hearers the assurance of the divine redemption (1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 4:25);
- **The resurrection of Christ is important to spiritual maturity.** The resurrection is regarded as the source and standard of the holiness of the believer. Every aspect of the Christian life from the beginning to the end is somehow associated therewith (Rom 6);
- **The resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for all future eschatology.** The resurrection is the guaranty and model of the believer's resurrection (1 Cor 15). As the bodies of the saints arose (Matt 27:52), so ours are to be quickened (Rom 8:11), and made like Christ's glorified body (Phil 3:21), thereby becoming spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15:44), that is, bodies ruled by their spirits and yet bodies.

These points offer only the barest outline of the fullness of New Testament teaching concerning the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. We invited you to continue to study and then set before others the case for Christianity. Let us go forth saying,

*Lives again our glorious King;
Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave?
Alleluia!*

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Part I

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April 23, 2000

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Dr. Stanford E. Murrell

*As the church is too holy for a foundation of rotteness,
So she is too real for a foundation of mist.*

~*~

Archbishop Alexander

I. **First Proof: The Life of Jesus**

- A. The need for a fitting end to His life
- B. Jesus anticipated His resurrection
- C. The veracity of Christ is at stake if He did not rise

II. **Second Proof: The Empty Grave**

- A. The theory of a swoon and a recovery in the tomb is impossible
- B. There are only two alternatives
 - 1. His body must have been taken by human hands
 - If friends how did they do it?
 - If enemies, why did they do it?
 - 2. His body must have been taken by superhuman power
- C. The position of the grave clothes prove the impossibility of the theft
- D. The failure of the Jews to disprove the resurrection supports the same
- E. The various forms of the Vision-theory are inadequate and impossible to explain the resurrection

III. **Third Proof: Transformation of the Disciples**

- A. Devastation turned to delightful exaltation
- B. The mere removal of the body could not have transformed them
- C. Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up
- D. Initially the disciples did NOT believe the first resurrection reports (Mark 16:11)
- E. A hallucination involving 500 people at once and repeated several times over 40 days is unthinkable

IV. **Fourth Proof: Existence of the Primitive Church**

- A. From the Book of Acts comes two simple facts
 - The Christian society was gathered together by preaching
 - The substance of the preaching was the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:41)
- B. The early church knew its own history

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1 Corinthians 15:1-19

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V. **Fifth Proof: The Witness of Paul**

- A. Manifested in Paul's personal testimony
- B. Manifested in Paul's interviews with those who had seen the risen Christ
- C. Manifested in Paul's own writings

VI. **Sixth Proof: The Gospel Record**

- A. Logically the final line of argument
- B. Two sets of appearances
 - 1. Jerusalem
 - 2. Galilee
- C. Two essential facts
 - 1. The empty tomb
 - 2. The appearance of Christ on the third day

VII. **Summary and conclusion**

- A. A miracle occurred
- B. A miracle is challenged

VIII. **Theology of the Resurrection**

- A. The resurrection is important as evidence of the validity of the work of Christ at Calvary (Rom. 1:14)
- B. The resurrection is important in evangelistic efforts (1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 4:25)
- C. The resurrection of Christ is important to spiritual maturity (Rom 6)
- D. The resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for all future eschatology (1 Cor 15; Matt 27:52; Rom 8:11; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:44)