Section I - Too Good News To Be True  
The black day of the crucifixion is past. The next day, the Jewish Sabbath, when the Weary One slept in His rock-hewn tomb, is also past. The first day of a new week and of a new era has dawned, and the Lord has risen from the dead. The Shepherd has returned to gather His scattered sheep. This is surely a happy day for the distraught disciples! What unbelievable joy must have filled their hearts at the thought of being reunited with their beloved Lord! How eagerly they must have looked forward to that resurrection morning!

This is what one might be inclined to think, but it really didn't happen this way. The disciples had none of these expectations. When the resurrection of Christ took place, their state of mind resembled that of the Jewish exiles in Babylon when they heard they were going to be returning to their native land. The first impact of the good news was that it made these men feel as if they were dreaming. The news seemed too good to be true. The captives (Israelites) who had sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion had given up hope that they would ever return to their own country. In fact, they were incapable of hoping for anything. “Grief was calm and hope was dead” within them. Then, when the exiles had recovered from the shock of the surprise that they were going back, they burst into laughter and irrepressible song (Ps. 137:1ff). This was the second impact that the good news made upon the Israelites.

The disciples had a very similar experience when Jesus rose from the dead. Their grief was not calm, but their hope was dead. The resurrection of their Master was totally unexpected by them. When the news came, they were surprised and could not believe that it had occurred. This is evident from the statements that all four of the evangelists make. Matthew states that when Christ met with His followers in Galilee after He had risen, some doubted while others worshiped (Mt. 28:17). Mark relates that when the disciples heard from Mary Magdalene that Jesus was alive and that she had actually seen Him, “they refused to believe it” (Mk. 16:11). He also writes that when the two disciples who were making the journey to Emmaus told their brothers about meeting Jesus on the way, “they did not believe them either” (Mk. 16:13). Furthermore, Mark comments about another occasion when Jesus met with all of the Eleven at the same time. “He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mk. 16:14).
Luke agrees with these statements of the first two evangelists. The way he represents the mental attitude of the disciples toward the resurrection of Jesus is very graphic and animated. According to him, the reports that came from the women seemed to be “nonsense” to them, and they would not believe them (Lk. 24:11). He also notes that the two men who were walking in the country when Jesus appeared to them had sad countenances even though they were aware of the rumors about the resurrection. It is true: They were so depressed that they did not recognize Jesus when He joined them and began to speak with them (Lk. 24:16). The resurrection was not a fact for them. All they knew was that their Master was dead and that they had trusted in vain that He was the One who would redeem Israel. Luke also informs us that when Jesus presented Himself to His disciples for the first time, they did recognize the resemblance of the apparition to their deceased Lord but thought it was only His ghost. Therefore, they were terrified. In fact, they were so frightened that Jesus had to show them His hands and feet and invite them to touch His body in order to alleviate their fear. He wanted them to satisfy themselves that He was not a ghost but a substantial human being with flesh and bones like any other man (Lk. 24:36-37).

Rather than giving us general statements, John gives a specific example of the unbelief of the disciples concerning the resurrection. He tells us about the extreme reaction of Thomas. He lets us know that Thomas had such unbelief that he refused to believe until he put his finger on the scars where the nails had been and placed his hand into the wound in the Savior’s side that was made by the spear. The other disciples struggled with their belief too, but to a lesser degree than Thomas. This is implied in the statement John made in an earlier part of his narrative. When Jesus met His disciples on the evening of the day on which He rose, “He showed them both His hands and His side” (Jn. 20:20).

The women who had believed in Christ did not expect the resurrection any more than the Eleven. They went to the sepulchre on the morning of the first day of the week intending to embalm the dead body of the One whom they loved. They sought the living among the dead. When Mary Magdalene (who arrived at the tomb before anyone else) found the grave empty, she thought someone had carried away the dead body of her Lord (Jn. 20:2).

When the disciples’ unbelief finally gave way to faith, they changed like the Hebrew exiles from being extremely depressed to having extravagant joy. When Thomas’ doubt was removed, he exclaimed with elation, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28). Luke tells us that when they recognized their risen Lord, the disciples “could not believe it for joy” (Lk. 24:41), as if toying with doubt acted as a stimulus to their joy. The two disciples with whom Jesus spoke on the way to Emmaus said to each other after He left them, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Lk. 24:32).

There is still another way in which the Eleven resembled the ancient Hebrew exiles when they were notified that they would return to Israel. Though their faith and hope were weak from
Jesus’ death until His resurrection, their love remained steadfast. The exiled Jew did not forget Jerusalem when he was in the land of strangers. Absence only made his heart grow fonder. As he sat by the rivers of Babylon - listless, motionless, with a far-away look in his eyes, gazing at the sluggish waters with glassy eyes - the big round tears rolled quietly down his cheeks, because he had been thinking about Zion. The exile who had a poetic soul did not forget what he owed to Jerusalem's honor. He was not capable of singing the Lord's songs in the hearing of a heathen audience, who cared nothing for their meaning, but only for the style in which they sang. So he refused to prostitute his talents for these oppressors of Israel, even though by doing so he might gain his restoration to the beloved country of his birth. This is supposedly what the Athenian captives did in Sicily when they recited lines from their favorite poet Euripides in the hearing of their Sicilian masters.

The disciples, like the exiles, were just as loyal to the memory of their Lord. They were like a “widow indeed” (I Tim. 5:16) who remains faithful to her deceased husband and emphasizes his virtues, even though he has absolutely no reputation in the eyes of the world. It didn’t matter that others wanted to call Jesus a deceiver; they simply could not believe that He was. An impostor? Never! Therefore, though He is dead and their hope gone, they still act like men who treasure their connection to their Master whom they have lost. They stay together like a bereaved family, keeping their blinds down, so to speak, shutting and barring their doors because they feared the Jews. And they identify themselves with the Crucified. As His friends, they dread the unbelieving world’s desire for them to experience ill-will. But their lives are an admirable example to all Christians on how to act when trouble, rebuke, and blasphemy come, or when the cause of Christ seems lost, and the powers of darkness have everything going their own way (for the moment). Though faith is overshadowed and hope extinguished, let the heart always be loyal to its true Lord!

The disciples’ state of mind at the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is of great importance to those who seek to defend the faith. Their despair after their Lord’s crucifixion provides great weight to the testimony given by them about the fact of the resurrection. Men who were in this frame of mind were not likely to believe in the resurrection unless it could not reasonably be disbelieved. They would not be satisfied with a half-truth as people tend to be when they desire and look for certain things to happen. No. These men would be skeptical and demand an abundance of evidence, just like men do in situations when they want certain things to happen, but they do not expect them. They would be slow to believe the testimony of others and might even hesitate to believe their own eyes. They would not be able to manufacture a belief in the resurrection of Jesus just because the women who went to embalm His body found His grave empty on the third day after His death. When that was reported, it made Peter and John run to the sepulchre to check things out for themselves. But after they confirmed the women’s report, the question still remained: How was the empty tomb supposed to be explained? Mary Magdalene’s theory that someone had carried off the corpse would not seem to be all that improbable.
From what we know about the mental condition of the disciples, the inferences we have presented are fully supported by the Gospel accounts about the reception they gave to the risen Jesus when He first appeared to them. Every one of them approached these appearances with skepticism and went to a lot of trouble to satisfy themselves that what they were seeing was not a ghostly apparition, but a living man, the same Man who had died on the cross. One moment, the disciples are doubting the resurrection even took place. The next, they are doubting the identity of the Person who appeared to them. Therefore, they were not content just to see Jesus. At His own request, they touched Him. One of them not only handled the body to ascertain that the substance or matter could not be compressed but insisted on examining, with skeptical curiosity, those parts which had been injured by the nails and the spear. All of them perceived the resemblance between the person they were looking at and Jesus, but they could not be persuaded of the identity because they were so totally unprepared to see the Dead One alive again.

At first, their theory was that they had seen a ghost or apparition. And the very fact that they entertained that theory makes it impossible for us to do the same. In the face of that fact, we cannot not accept Strauss’ position (David Friedrich Strauss, 1808-1874), that “the faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which by His violent death had received an apparently fatal shock, was subjectively restored by the instrumentality of the mind, the power of the imagination and nervous excitement.” We know how much the power of the imagination and nervous excitement can do. People in an abnormal, excited state often see things in outer space which are only the creations of a “heated brain.” But people in a crazy state like that - subject to hallucination - are not usually cool and rational enough to doubt the reality of what they see. Nor is it necessary in their case to work hard to overcome such doubts. Instead, what they need is to be made aware that what they think they see is not a reality. This is the very reverse of what Christ had to do for the disciples. He did it by solemnly asserting that He was not a spirit, by inviting them to touch Him in order to satisfy themselves that he had material substance, and by eating food in their presence.

The Theft Theory

When we constantly keep the mental condition of the Eleven at the time of Christ’s resurrection before our eyes, the falsehood and absurdity of the theft theory which was invented by the Jewish priests becomes readily apparent. According to this theory, the disciples came at night while the guards were asleep and stole the dead body of Jesus so that they might be able to circulate the belief that He had risen from the dead. Matthew tells us that even before the resurrection, the murderers of our Lord were afraid this might happen. So, to prevent any fraud like this, they appealed to Pilate to have a guard put at the grave. He did as they asked and, with contempt, granted them permission to take whatever steps they felt were necessary to prevent a “resurrection” on the part of the dead or the living. With scorn, he replied, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how” (Mt. 27:65). So they did. They sealed the stone and placed guards there. However, their precautions did not prevent the resurrection nor the belief in it. It only furnished an illustration of the folly of those who try to manage providence and to control the
course of the world's history. They assigned themselves a lot of work, and it all came to nothing. We are not saying that we lean in the direction of denying the astuteness of these ecclesiastical politicians. Their plan for preventing the resurrection was very thoughtful, and their way of explaining it away afterwards was very plausible. The story they invented was really a very respectable fabrication and was certain to satisfy everyone who wanted a decent theory to justify a foregone conclusion as, in fact, it seems to have done. According to Matthew, it was commonly reported years later after the resurrection (Mt. 28:15). It was not improbable that soldiers would fall asleep at night while they were on duty, especially when guarding a dead body (which was not likely to give them any trouble). And, in the eyes of the unbelieving world, the followers of the Nazarene were capable of using any means to promote their own goals.

Even if we grant all of this and assume that the members of the Sanhedrin had been right in their opinion about the character of the disciples, their theft theory is ridiculous. The disciples were not in a state of mind to even think about something like this, even if their consciences allowed them to steal the body. They did not have it in them to be so daring. Sorrow lay like a lead weight on their hearts and made them almost as dead as the corpse they are supposed to have stolen. So the motive for the theft is one which could not have influenced them then. Steal the body to propagate a belief in the resurrection? Did they have any interest in propagating a belief that they did not entertain themselves? “For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (Jn. 20:9). Nor did they remember anything their Master had said about this subject before He died. Some people have a hard time believing this statement. In order to handle this difficulty, some suggest that our Lord’s predictions about His resurrection may not have been as definite as they appear in the Gospels but may have taken on a more definitive form after it occurred when their meaning was clearly understood. We do not see any reason to accept such a position. There is no doubt that Jesus spoke very clearly about His death. Yet when He died, it took the disciples as much by surprise as the resurrection did. One explanation is sufficient in both cases. The disciples were not clever, quick-witted, sentimental men as Renan makes them out to be (Editor’s note: J. Ernest Renan, 1823-1892, was a French theologian who tried to eliminate the supernatural and reduce Jesus merely to a magnetic teacher; wrote Life of Jesus in 1863). They were stupid, slow-minded people; very honest, but very incapable of taking in new ideas. They were like horses with blinders on. They could see in only one direction - in the direction of their prejudices. The surgery of the events that took place was required to insert a new truth into their minds. Nothing would change the current of their thoughts but a dam of undeniable fact. They could be convinced that Christ had to die only by His dying, that He would rise only by His rising, and that His kingdom was not to be of this world only by the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and the grafting in of the Gentiles. Let us be thankful for the honest stupidity of these men. It gives great value to their testimony. We know that nothing but the facts could make men like this believe what today they are accused of inventing.
We have used the doubts of the disciples about the resurrection of Christ in order to defend the Christian faith. This is not only a legitimate use of their doubts but obviously what was intended by virtue of their having been recorded. The evangelists have carefully chronicled these doubts that we might have no doubt. These things were written that we might believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead. The Apostles attached supreme importance to that fact - a fact they had doubted in the days when they were being discipled. It was the foundation of their doctrinal building, an essential part of their gospel. The Apostle Paul correctly summed up the gospel that was preached by the men who had been with Jesus, as well as by himself, with these three truths: “That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried; and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (I Cor. 15:3-4). All of the Eleven thoroughly agreed with Paul’s thoughts that, if Christ had not risen, their preaching was vain, and the faith of Christians was also vain (I Cor. 15:14). There is no gospel at all unless He who died for people’s sins also rose again for their justification. Having this conviction in their minds, they constantly bore witness to the resurrection of Jesus wherever they went. Bearing witness was such an important part of their work that, when Peter suggested that someone be chosen to replace Judas, he singled this out as the most important function of the apostolic office. “Of the men,” he said, “who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us....one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

Apostolic Preaching
In their apostolic preaching, they attached supreme importance to the fact of Christ’s resurrection, and it is our responsibility to do the same. Modern unbelievers, like some in the Corinthian church, try to persuade us that it does not matter whether Jesus rose or not. They say all that is important in Christianity has nothing to do with historical truth. Many believers who are addicted to an empty spiritualism practically agree with these people. They neglect the supernatural facts and treat them with contempt. Consequently, they believe the high doctrines of the faith are all that is worthy of their respect. To the people who think like this, the kind of studies which we have dealt with in this chapter seem to be a waste of time. And if they told us how they really feel, they would say, “Let these insignificant things alone and give us the pure and simple gospel.” Intelligent, sober-minded, and sincere Christians differ toto cælo (by the whole heavens; diametrically opposite) from both of these types of people. From their point of view, Christianity is, in the first place, a religion of supernatural facts. These facts occupy the primary place in their creed. They know that if these facts are honestly believed, all the great doctrines of the faith must sooner or later be accepted. On the other hand, they clearly understand that any religion which despises or disbelieves these facts is just a fanciful dream which must soon vanish or is like a house built on sand which the storm will sweep away. Therefore, while these Christians acknowledge the importance of all revealed truth, they place a very special emphasis on revealed facts. So, even though they believe with their hearts the precious truth that Christ died for our sins, they are careful, like the Apostles, to include in their gospel these facts: that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day.