

The Stakes

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the resurrection is presented by St. Paul himself as a falsifiable claim about a public event, on which the entire Christian faith stands or falls, and the three of you agree together on fair rules for investigating it.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church claims that the resurrection is a real event with manifestations that were historically verified (CCC 639), while the rising itself was seen by no one and passes beyond history (CCC 647). We will argue toward the fact from its effects, honestly, without pretending to laboratory proof.

■ What You Need to Know

St. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus around AD 53 to 55, roughly twenty to twenty-five years after the crucifixion. In chapter 15 he answers Corinthians who doubted a future resurrection, and he does it by planting the whole faith on one past event. Read verses 12 to 19 slowly before the session. Paul does not say the resurrection is a beautiful idea that consoles believers whether or not it happened. He says the opposite: if it did not happen, the preaching is empty, the faith is empty, the witnesses are liars, the dead are gone, and Christians are pitiable. Paul does something remarkable here: he states, in public writing, the exact condition under which the whole faith would collapse. That is the door this study walks through, and it is why every person at this table can enter it with integrity fully intact.

This session sets the method for all eight. We will use what scholars call a minimal facts approach: we will build only on facts granted by the broad spectrum of scholarship, including scholars who are not Christians, and we will test every explanation of those facts, the Church's included, by the ordinary standards historians use. Your friend already grants more than many skeptics: a real Jesus, really crucified. His own working theory, that Jesus may have survived the cross, is a serious historical proposal with a long pedigree, and Session 2 will present it at full strength before testing it. Say that plainly tonight. He should hear from the start that his idea will be honored, not ambushed.

Be equally plain about what the Church does and does not claim. No evangelist describes the rising itself. No one saw it. The Church has never claimed otherwise (CCC 647). What the witnesses claimed to see were its effects: an empty tomb and a living man. The question of this study is what best explains those claimed effects. Keep that frame; it is honest, and it is the Church's own.

Finally, understand the two instruments introduced tonight. The Fact Ledger is a printed sheet kept on the table. A fact enters it only when all three of you sign it; anyone may decline any line without explanation, and any line may be revisited later. By Session 7 the ledger, not anyone's feelings, will be the thing on trial. The sealed verdicts are private: each of you writes what you actually think happened that Sunday morning, seals it, and no one reads anyone's until Session 7, and then only his own, privately. All three write, the leader first of all, so that no one at this table is ever the specimen. Everyone is a fellow investigator.

■ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The creed Paul hands on says Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:4). Which scriptures? Israel's prayers and prophets carry a pattern of God vindicating his faithful one beyond death. Psalm 16 prays, "For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit" (Ps 16:10), the very text St. Peter preaches at Pentecost (Acts 2:25-32). Hosea promises, "After two days he

will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him” (Hos 6:2). Jesus himself points to Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40). And Isaiah’s Servant, after being “cut off out of the land of the living,” somehow “shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days” (Isa 53:8, 10). Tonight the group hunts these texts themselves; do not hand them over early.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Augustine of Hippo • *The City of God, Book 22, Chapter 5*

Augustine turns the skeptic’s challenge around. In substance he argues: if the world came to believe that a crucified man rose, without any miracles persuading it, then that worldwide belief, spread by a handful of uneducated fishermen against every instinct of Greek philosophy and Roman power, would itself be a miracle greater than all the rest. Either the miracles happened, or something at least as hard to explain did. We offer his argument here as an honest summary of the chapter rather than a quotation.

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I, Chapter 6*

St. Thomas, weighing whether assenting to faith is foolish credulity, answers in substance: the conversion of the world to Christianity is a public fact demanding an explanation. Simple men, preaching a message the wise ridiculed, promising persecution rather than pleasure, won the world. Divine confirmation, he argues, is the sober explanation; and if one denies all the miracles, the conversion of the world without miracles remains, as he puts it, the greatest sign of all. A summary in our words of his argument.

St. John Paul II • *Fides et Ratio, opening line (1998)*

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” This study takes both wings seriously. Reason can carry a person a long way toward Easter morning; this study exists because the Church is not afraid of the flight.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 639:** “The mystery of Christ’s resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the New Testament bears witness.”
- **CCC 643-644:** the appearances confronted disciples who did not expect them and at first did not believe them; the faith of the first community was born from real experience they initially resisted.
- **CCC 647:** no one was an eyewitness to the rising itself and no evangelist describes it; the event, while leaving historically verifiable signs, transcends history.
- **CCC 156:** the motives of credibility. Miracles, prophecies, the Church’s growth, holiness, and stability are “the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all,” yet the assent of faith remains a free act aided by grace, not the forced conclusion of a proof.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Thread 1, the Fact Ledger (Sessions 1 to 7). Introduced tonight. Only unanimous lines enter. Guard the unanimity rule jealously; the ledger’s power in Session 7 depends on your friend having signed every line himself.

Thread 2, the sealed verdicts (Sessions 1 to 7). Written and sealed tonight by all three. Do not refer to their contents again until Session 7.

Thread 3, “in accordance with the scriptures” (Sessions 1 to 8). Planted tonight when the group hunts the third-day texts. Each session’s Old Testament roots feed it. It resolves in Session 8 when the risen Christ himself opens the scriptures (Luke 24:44-47).

Thread 4, “they knew the difference” (Sessions 2 to 8). Not planted tonight. Beginning next session: the witnesses had seen resuscitations (Lazarus), and what they claimed for Jesus was something else entirely. Resolves in Session 8.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Roles. One of you leads; the other sits as co-investigator. The co-investigator’s job all study long is to ask real questions, voice honest difficulties, and show what it looks like to hold a conviction and still examine the evidence without flinching. What must never happen is two voices pressing one. If the leader presses, the co-investigator does not pile on.

His theory is welcome. When the survival idea comes up tonight, and it may, receive it with genuine respect and say that Session 2 is built to give it the strongest hearing in this entire study. Do not rebut it tonight. Anticipation is your friend.

Prayer. Open and close briefly. Invite, never require: “We’re going to pray for a moment; you’re welcome to listen or join, whatever is comfortable.” No prayer aimed at him, ever.

Pace. He sets it. If a question lands hard, let silence do its work. You are not closing a sale in eight weeks; you are examining evidence with a friend.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group reads 1 Corinthians 15 and articulates exactly what Paul says collapses if the resurrection did not happen.
2. The group discovers the third-day scriptures themselves (Psalm 16, Hosea 6, Jonah, Isaiah 53).
3. All three agree to the Rules of the Investigation and understand the Fact Ledger.
4. The first ledger lines are proposed from what all three already grant.
5. All three write and seal private verdicts.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. With three people, discussion moves faster than in a large group; resist the urge to fill saved time with more content. If you must cut: drop the Dig Deeper box and trim Build question 4, but never cut the Rules of the Investigation or the sealed verdicts. They are the spine of the study.

The Stakes

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, you are not afraid of our questions. For the next eight weeks, give the three of us honesty, courage, and friendship, and lead us wherever the truth is. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is one belief you changed your mind about as an adult? What actually changed it?
2. When you hear the word “evidence,” what comes to mind first? What kinds of evidence do you trust most, and least?

▪ Build

Read aloud: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, then 15:12-19.

if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:14 (RSV2CE)

1. Make a list together: what exactly does Paul say is lost if Christ has not been raised? Go verse by verse through 12 to 19.

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The preaching is in vain (v. 14); the faith is in vain (v. 14) and futile (v. 17); the apostles are misrepresenting God, that is, lying about him (v. 15); “you are still in your sins” (v. 17); “those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (v. 18); and Christians are “of all men most to be pitied” (v. 19). Paul leaves no fallback position. There is no version of Christianity that survives a dead Jesus. That is not a modern apologist’s framing; it is the earliest Christian theologian’s own.

2. In verse 6 Paul mentions more than five hundred people who saw the risen Jesus at once, “most of whom are still alive.” Why would a writer include that phrase in a public letter?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

It is an invitation to check. “Still alive” means available for questioning. Whatever one concludes about the claim, this is not the voice of a man hedging a private myth; it is the voice of a man pointing at living witnesses in a world where his enemies would gladly have called his bluff. We will spend Session 4 on this passage; tonight it is enough to notice the posture.

3. Twice the creed says these things happened “in accordance with the scriptures.” Which scriptures? Hunt for them: start with Psalm 16:10, Hosea 6:2, Matthew 12:40, and Isaiah 53:8-10. What pattern do you find?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A pattern of vindication beyond death: the godly one not abandoned to Sheol (Ps 16:10, preached of Jesus by Peter in Acts 2); raised “on the third day” (Hos 6:2); Jonah’s three days in the deep claimed by Jesus as his own sign (Matt 12:40); the Servant cut off from the land of the living who yet prolongs his days (Isa 53). The first Christians did not treat the resurrection as a surprise bolted onto their Bible; they claimed

it was the destination their Bible had been driving at. Whether that claim holds is part of what we are investigating. Keep the question open; it will return in Session 8.

4. Look again at 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. Based on that passage alone, what would it take to falsify Christianity? What would its enemies have needed to produce?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A body, or a living, aging, dying Jesus. Paul stakes everything on a claim about a corpse and a tomb in a known city within living memory. This study exists because that is a claim evidence can touch.

The Rules of the Investigation

Read these aloud and agree to them together. Amend them together if you wish; they belong to the three of you.

- We follow the evidence where it leads, all three of us, in either direction.
- Every objection gets its strongest form before it gets an answer. If a theory is tested here, it will be the best version of that theory.
- We build only on facts all three of us accept. That is what the Fact Ledger is for.
- A fact enters the ledger only by unanimous signature. Anyone may decline any line, without explanation, and no one argues with a decline. Any line may be reopened later by anyone.
- Nobody here is a project. We are three investigators at one table.

The Fact Ledger: First Lines

Bring out the ledger sheet. Explain the unanimity rule. Then propose the first candidate lines, drawn from what everyone at this table already holds. Discuss, then sign or hold:

- *Proposed line 1:* Jesus of Nazareth was a real man who lived in first-century Judea.
- *Proposed line 2:* He was crucified by Roman authority under Pontius Pilate.

If either line does not get three signatures tonight, that is not a failure; it is the ledger working. Note the hold and move on.

What the Church Actually Claims

Read aloud CCC 639 and CCC 647 (printed on tonight's Take-Home).

5. Does anything in those two paragraphs surprise you? What is the Church claiming happened, and what is she explicitly not claiming?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Many people are surprised that the Church herself states that no one witnessed the rising and no evangelist describes it (CCC 647). The claim is not "we saw it happen" but "we met him afterward, and the tomb was empty." The Church claims a real event with historically verifiable manifestations (CCC 639), an event that nonetheless exceeds what history alone can capture. Our investigation targets exactly what the Church says is targetable: the manifestations, and what best explains them.

STEELMAN • "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence"

LEADER • do not read aloud. Give this objection its full weight before anyone answers it.

READ ALOUD. David Hume argued, in substance: dead men stay dead. All of human experience says so. So if someone tells you a dead man rose, it is always more likely that the teller is mistaken than that the

dead man rose. Carl Sagan's famous maxim, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, compresses the same instinct into one line. It deserves respect: it is why we do not believe every ghost story, and anyone at this table is right to bring that instinct to the evidence.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. First, the maxim is a demand to weigh evidence, not permission to ignore it. A rule that says no evidence could ever count, no matter what, is not skepticism. It is a closed door. Second, Hume assumes the very thing we are investigating. He says uniform experience proves that dead men stay dead. But whether one man is the exception is exactly the question on this table. You cannot settle a question by assuming your answer and calling it experience; Hume's own critics have pressed him on this for two centuries. Third, ask what extraordinary evidence for a past event could even look like. History does not repeat itself on demand, so it cannot mean a rerun. For any singular past event, strong evidence looks like this: early testimony, from multiple witnesses, that could be checked, given by people with nothing to gain, whose lives changed in ways otherwise hard to explain, in a place where enemies could have shut the story down. Whether the resurrection has that kind of evidence is this study's question. Agree tonight only on the standard, not the verdict.

DIG DEEPER

How early is the creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7? Paul says he is handing on what he received, using the formal vocabulary of tradition (paradosis). Where and when did he receive it? Hold the question; Session 4 answers it, and the answer, agreed to even by prominent non-Christian scholars, is one of the most startling facts in ancient history.

The Sealed Verdicts

Each of the three of you now takes a verdict card (on your Take-Home sheet) and completes this sentence privately: "What I actually think happened that Sunday morning is..." Be as blunt as you like; no one will read it but you. Seal it in the envelope, write your name on the outside, and hand it to the leader. They will come back, unopened, in Session 7. All three write. All three seal.

▪ **Send**

1. If this turned out to be true, what would change for you personally? If it turned out to be false, what would honesty require of each of us?
2. Of everything on the table tonight, which single fact or claim would you most want to see checked in the coming weeks?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 once more, slowly, on your own. Write one sentence: what is Paul risking by writing this?
- Notice this week how you decide what to believe about events you did not witness: news, history, other people's lives. What standards do you actually use?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, we have agreed to follow the evidence. Give us the honesty to keep that promise, and stay near each of us this week. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:14 (RSV2CE)

The Stakes

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 • read aloud (the creed and the witnesses)
- 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 • read aloud (the stakes)
- 1 Corinthians 15:14 • memory verse
- Psalm 16:10 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Hosea 6:2 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Matthew 12:40 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Isaiah 53:8-10 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Acts 2:25-32 • leader background (Peter preaching Psalm 16)
- CCC 639, 643-644, 647, 156 • doctrine anchors; 639 and 647 read aloud

Materials tonight: the Fact Ledger sheet, three pens, three envelopes, Take-Home 1 (distributed at the end; it carries the verdict cards).