

The Witnesses

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

▪ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group dates the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 for themselves using Paul's own biography, discovers that the appearance reports go back to within a few years of the crucifixion at most, and tests the hallucination theory at full strength against the character of the reports.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 641-644: the appearances confronted men who did not expect them and at first did not believe them; the disciples' doubt, preserved in the record, is part of the evidence.

▪ What You Need to Know

Tonight the group performs a piece of real historical detective work, and you should let them feel it. In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul uses the formal rabbinic vocabulary of tradition: "I delivered to you... what I also received" (paradosis, handing on). What follows in verses 3 to 7 is a compact, rhythmically structured formula that Paul presents as received tradition and that most scholars judge substantially pre-Pauline, though how much is fixed wording and how much is Paul's framing remains debated; say it with that precision. When did he receive it? He wrote around AD 53-55 and had founded the Corinthian church around 50-51, so the tradition predates that. But Paul's own letters push it much earlier: in Galatians 1:18-19 he says that three years after his conversion he went up to Jerusalem and spent fifteen days with Cephas, also seeing James, the two men the formula names. Paul's conversion is generally dated within about one to three years of the crucifixion. Do the arithmetic with the group: the tradition was in Paul's hands by the mid-30s at the latest, within a few years of the event, and his fifteen days with Cephas and James is the most natural occasion for receiving or confirming it, even though the texts do not let us fix the exact moment. This is not a Christian apologist's private claim; scholars across the spectrum, including prominent non-Christian scholars such as Gerd Lüdemann, date the tradition to the first years after the crucifixion. In ancient history, testimony that early, that formal, and that traceable is almost unheard of.

Second, the character of the appearance reports. They are strikingly various: to individuals (Cephas, James, Mary Magdalene) and to groups (the Twelve, "more than five hundred brethren at one time," all the apostles); indoors and outdoors; to mourners and, later, to an enemy; involving conversation, touch, and shared meals. Luke 24 and John 20-21 insist on physicality: "handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39); broiled fish eaten "before them" (24:42-43); breakfast on the beach (John 21). And the record repeatedly preserves initial disbelief: they "supposed that they saw a spirit" (Luke 24:37), "some doubted" (Matt 28:17), Thomas refused secondhand testimony for a week (John 20:24-29). CCC 644 makes the disciples' doubt part of the Church's own account. Witnesses who report their own slowness to believe are not exhibiting the psychology of wish fulfillment.

Third, the background expectation, which is the quiet key to the whole night. First-century Jews who believed in resurrection at all expected it as one general event at the end of history (Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 7; and see Martha in John 11:24: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"). Nobody's categories contained a single man rising in the middle of history while Rome still ruled. A hallucinating mourner sees what his categories supply: a comforting presence, a vision of the beloved in glory with the Father. "He is risen bodily and I have eaten with him" was not in the deck of available conclusions. Something forced a category no one had.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Daniel 12:2 promises that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,” and the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 7 die confessing that the King of the universe will raise them up: resurrection hope, firmly at the end of history. Tonight’s discovery hunt sends the group to Daniel 12:2 and John 11:24 to establish for themselves what a first-century mourner expected, and therefore what a grief-vision could and could not have produced. The hunt feeds Thread 3 from an unexpected angle: the scriptures shaped expectations, and the reports broke them.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Gregory the Great • *Homilies on the Gospels 26*

On the apostle Thomas, Gregory makes the Church’s boldest claim about doubt: in substance, that the disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the belief of the other disciples, for in touching the wounds and being convinced, he healed in advance the wound of our unbelief. God permitted the doubt, Gregory argues, for the sake of every later generation that would need a witness who had checked. A summary in our words of a homily read by the Church in her liturgy.

St. Augustine of Hippo • *Tractates on the Gospel of John 121*

On the same scene Augustine observes, in substance, that Thomas saw and touched the man, and confessed the God he neither saw nor touched: “My Lord and my God!” The senses delivered a living body; faith, moving through what the senses delivered, reached who it was. Augustine’s point is precise for our study: evidence and faith are not rivals; the one carries a person to the threshold of the other. A summary in our words.

St. Leo the Great • *Sermons on the Resurrection (Sermon 71)*

Pope St. Leo preaches that in the forty days the Lord ate with his disciples, conversed, and let them handle him precisely so that the reality of his risen flesh would be established beyond doubt, and our faith fortified against every denial: the delays and proofs, Leo says in substance, were for us. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 641:** the women, then Peter, then the Twelve: the chain of first witnesses on whose testimony the community’s faith is built.
- **CCC 642-643:** the apostles’ witness to concrete appearances; so real that the news was at first not believed.
- **CCC 644:** “Even when faced with the reality of the risen Jesus the disciples are still doubtful”; the faith of the first community was born, under grace, from direct experience that overcame their hesitation, not from credulity.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Three candidate lines tonight. The dating line is the study’s crown jewel; make sure the group derived the date themselves from Galatians before it is proposed, or the signature will feel borrowed rather than earned.

Thread 3. Daniel 12:2 and John 11:24 feed the scriptures thread by defining the expectation the reports

broke.

Bridge to Session 5. The hallucination press ends by noting that grief theories require griever, and the two most consequential witnesses were not grieving. Leave it exactly there.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Let him do the arithmetic. The creed-dating exercise works only if your friend holds the pencil: crucifixion, plus one to three years to Paul's conversion, plus three years to the Jerusalem visit with Cephas and James. If the leader announces the answer, it is apologetics; if your friend computes it, it is discovery.

Respect the hallucination theory's real science. Bereavement experiences are genuinely common; concede that immediately and warmly. The press is not "hallucinations aren't real" but "here is what they are like, and here is what was reported; compare."

The five hundred. If he objects that we cannot interview them, agree, and point at what we can verify: that Paul publicly claimed, in a letter to a fractious church, that most were alive to be asked. Then let it weigh what it weighs.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group identifies the creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and its transmission vocabulary.
2. The group derives the creed's date themselves from Galatians 1:18-19.
3. The group catalogs the variety and physicality of the appearance reports, and the preserved doubt.
4. The group establishes the first-century resurrection expectation and why grief-visions could not supply the actual claim.
5. The hallucination theory is steelmanned and tested; ledger lines proposed.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper box and question 6. Never cut the dating exercise or the hallucination steelman.

The Witnesses

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we listen to witnesses. Give us fair minds, sharp questions, and the humility to follow what we find. Amen.

▪ Win

1. Have you ever been certain you saw or heard something that turned out not to be there? What was the experience like, and how did you find out?
2. What separates a rumor from testimony, in your view? What would you want to know about a witness before trusting them?

▪ Build

Read aloud: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (RSV2CE)

1. “Delivered... received” is the formal vocabulary of handing on fixed tradition. What follows reads like a formula: short parallel clauses, a list of witnesses. What is Paul doing here, and what is he *not* doing?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

He is handing on, not inventing: presenting to the Corinthians a confession he says he himself received (“what I also received”), very likely already-formulated tradition rather than his own composition, though how much of the wording was fixed is debated. He is not telling a story that grew in his own hands; he is producing the receipt. The question that decides everything is when he received it.

2. The dating exercise. Take a pen. Read Galatians 1:13-19. Paul converted within a few years of the crucifixion; three years later he spent fifteen days in Jerusalem with Cephas, and saw James. The creed names Cephas and James. Build the timeline yourselves: by what date, at the very latest, was this tradition in Paul’s hands? Who plausibly gave it to him?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Crucifixion around AD 30; Paul’s conversion within about one to three years; the Jerusalem visit three years after that: roughly the mid-30s. The tradition was in Paul’s hands within a few years of the event at most, and the fifteen days with the two men the formula names is its most natural occasion, even if no text lets us fix the exact moment of transmission. Scholars across the spectrum, including the non-Christian scholar Gerd Lüdemann, date this tradition to the first years after the crucifixion. Whatever one concludes about what the witnesses saw, there is no gap here for legend to grow in. The claim “he was raised, and he appeared” is not the end product of decades of retelling; it is the founding announcement.

3. Catalog the appearances in the creed plus the Gospel accounts (Luke 24; John 20-21; Matt 28): to whom, how many at once, in what settings, doing what? What patterns emerge?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Individuals and groups; women and men; indoors, outdoors, on a road, on a beach; conversation, touch, broiled fish eaten before them, breakfast served; over weeks; to mourners, to doubters, and later to an enemy. “More than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive” is a public dare to check. The reports are various in every dimension in which hallucinations are uniform.

Read aloud: Luke 24:36-43.

4. What do the disciples first assume they are seeing (v. 37)? How does the account answer that assumption, and why does it matter that the doubt is in the record at all?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

They “supposed that they saw a spirit,” exactly the conclusion a vision would license, and the account answers it in the flesh: “handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have,” then the fish, eaten before them. The record preserves their wrong first guess and its correction. CCC 644 points here: the disciples doubted, and said so forever after. Wish fulfillment does not archive its own resistance.

5. Discovery hunt: what did first-century Jews actually expect about resurrection? Read Daniel 12:2, then John 11:24 (Martha, days before Easter). When was resurrection supposed to happen?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

At the end: “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” on the last day, which is exactly Martha’s creed about her own brother: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Nobody expected one man to rise in the middle of history. This is the hallucination theory’s hidden problem: visions draw on the categories mourners already have, and this category did not exist to be drawn on.

STEELMAN • The Hallucination Theory, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. Bereavement hallucinations are among the best documented phenomena in grief psychology: a large fraction of the widowed report sensing, seeing, or hearing the deceased, and the experiences can be vivid, consoling, and recurrent. The disciples were traumatized, guilt-ridden, sleep-deprived, and desperate. Peter, who denied him, had every psychological motive for a vision of forgiveness. Once one revered leader announced an experience, expectation could cascade through the group; religious history knows collective enthusiasms. On this theory the witnesses are perfectly sincere, which fits their later courage, and nothing supernatural is required.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Grant the science, then compare the phenomena. Grief visions are private; these reports are dominated by groups, up to five hundred at once, and hallucinations are not networked; they cannot be shared like a film. Grief visions console within existing categories; these reports forced a category (bodily resurrection mid-history) that tonight’s hunt just showed did not exist. Grief visions do not eat broiled fish, hold conversations across weeks with groups, or cook breakfast. Grief visions famously do not empty tombs: a Jerusalem full of sincere visionaries still has a body in Joseph’s tomb, and Session 3’s evidence says nobody could produce one. And grief requires griever: the theory has nothing to say about a persecutor and an unbelieving brother, which is exactly where we go next week.

DIG DEEPER

On “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44): some argue Paul meant a non-physical appearance, making the Gospel physicality later embellishment. But Paul’s phrase *sōma pneumatikon* means a body animated by the Spirit, not a body made of spirit; the same adjective describes the “spiritual rock” and “spiritual food” of Israel’s Exodus (1 Cor 10:3-4), which were physical rock and physical manna. Paul, the earliest witness we possess in writing, insists on transformation of the body, not escape from it: “this mortal nature must put on immortality” (15:53). Session 8 returns here.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Within a few years of the crucifixion at most, a fixed creed was circulating in Jerusalem naming eyewitnesses to appearances of the risen Jesus.
- *Proposed:* Groups as well as individuals reported seeing him, in varied settings, including eating with him.
- *Proposed:* The reports arose among people whose own record says they did not at first believe, and whose culture had no category for one man rising in the middle of history.

▪ Send

1. If you had been Thomas, absent that first Sunday, what would you have demanded? Was his demand reasonable?
2. Which is harder for you to explain away tonight: the earliness of the creed, or the group character of the reports? Why?

▪ Live It This Week

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Galatians 1:11-24 on your own; redo the timeline arithmetic in your head until you own it.
- Ask someone you trust this week how they would tell a vivid dream from something that really happened. Note what tests they name.

▪ Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord, you did not scold Thomas; you showed him your hands. Show each of us what we honestly need to see. Amen.

▪ Scripture Memory Verse

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.

Luke 24:39 (RSV2CE)

The Witnesses

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 • read aloud (the creed)
- Galatians 1:13-19 • read aloud (the dating exercise)
- Luke 24:36-43 • read aloud (flesh and bones; the fish)
- Daniel 12:2 • discovery hunt (resurrection at the end)
- John 11:24 • discovery hunt (Martha's expectation)
- Matthew 28:17 • cited (some doubted)
- John 20:24-29 • cited (Thomas)
- 1 Corinthians 10:3-4; 15:44, 53 • Dig Deeper (spiritual body)
- Luke 24:39 • memory verse
- CCC 641, 642-643, 644 • doctrine anchors

No source cards tonight; the primary sources are Scripture itself, dated by the group's own hands.