

Resurrection Skeptics

By David Feddes

Robert Funk was a resurrection skeptic. Funk said, "Jesus did not rise from the dead except perhaps in some metaphorical sense." Why mention Robert Funk? He sounds like just another grumpy unbeliever. But Funk's career was as an influential Bible scholar. Funk was chairman of the Vanderbilt Religion Department. He was president of the Society of Biblical Literature, the world's main guild for academic study of the Bible. He was founder and director of Scholars Press, a prestigious publishing house. Funk was also founder of the Jesus Seminar, a group that claimed expertise on determining what Jesus really said and did.

Jesus' resurrection is not the only thing Robert Funk didn't believe in. Here are some other statements from Funk:

There is not a personal god out there external to human beings and the material world.

The demise of a geocentric universe took the doctrine of special creation with it.

Death is not punishment for sin, but is entirely natural.

The notion that God interferes with the order of nature from time to time in order to aid or punish is no longer credible, in spite of the fact that most people still believe it. Miracles are an affront to the justice and integrity of God, however understood.

Prayer is meaningless when understood as requests addressed to an external God for favor or forgiveness and meaningless if God does not interfere with the laws of nature.

We should give Jesus a demotion. It is no longer credible to think of Jesus as divine.

A Jesus who drops down out of heaven, performs some magical act that frees human beings from the power of sin, rises from the dead, and returns to heaven is simply no longer credible. The notion that he will return at the end of time and sit in cosmic judgment is equally incredible.

The virgin birth of Jesus is an insult to modern intelligence and should be abandoned. In addition, it is a pernicious doctrine that denigrates women.

The doctrine of the atonement--the claim that God killed his own son in order to satisfy his thirst for satisfaction--is subrational and subethical. This monstrous doctrine is the stepchild of a primitive sacrificial system.

Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense. The meaning of the resurrection is that a few of his followers--probably no more than two or three--finally came to understand what he was all about. When the significance of his words and deeds dawned on them, they knew of no other terms in which to express their amazement than to claim that they had seen him alive.

The expectation that Jesus will return and sit in cosmic judgment is part and parcel of the mythological worldview that is now defunct. Furthermore, it undergirds human lust for the punishment of enemies and evildoers and the corresponding hope for rewards for the pious and righteous. All apocalyptic elements should be expunged from the Christian agenda.

The New Testament is a highly uneven and biased record of orthodox attempts to invent Christianity... The canon should be a collection of scriptures without a fixed text and without either inside or outside limits, like the myth of King Arthur and the knights of the roundtable or the myth of the American West.

Robert Funk is proof that a person can have all sorts of credentials and titles and influence in religious studies and yet reject all essential Christian teachings as false and even harmful. Funk died a few years ago, but other prominent scholars take a similar approach. We must be alert to the reality that much prestigious scholarship on the Bible comes from utter unbelievers, enemies of the Christian faith. Not only is this true of some of academicians studying theology and the Bible; it is also true of some who are heads of churches.

Bishop Without Belief

I live in the Chicago area, where Joseph Sprague is a bishop in the United Methodist denomination. In a speech to students at Iliff School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary for training future pastors, Bishop Sprague said, "God is not a supreme being out there in the beyond. Rather the word 'God' is the sound image we humans employ to point to the very essence of it all." As "the essence of it all," God infuses everything with "the Jesus power," "the Christ essence," which "drives creation's evolution."

According to Bishop Sprague, "Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe himself as John suggests." In reality, the apostle John was Jesus' closest friend who sat next to Jesus and leaned on him at the Last Supper, yet somehow the unbelieving bishop knows Jesus better than Jesus' best friend did. It would be hilarious if it weren't so harmful.

Sprague said, "Jesus did not possess trans-human, supernatural powers." It is safe to say that a man who does not believe in Jesus' supernatural power has never been touched by his power.

Sprague said that literal belief in bodily resurrection is "the kind of idolatry from which I dissent." Sprague declared, "I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot believe that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical body." He believes in resurrection without resurrection! How can there be a resurrection that doesn't involve a physical body coming back to life? Resurrection *is* a physical body coming back to life. It may be more than that, but it certainly isn't less.

The bishop claims that his approach is necessary for educated, intelligent people to believe the gospel. But what educated person who knows language and logic would be drawn to such tangled teaching? Who can make sense of such nonsense as resurrection where no body is raised, or creation's evolution, or a God who isn't a personal God? Part of Bishop Sprague's problem is

that he can't seem to think clearly or speak plainly. The other part of his problem is that what he does manage to communicate is heresy.

Some preachers and scholars say we shouldn't believe in the resurrection as physical fact but only as spiritual change in outlook. They say the resurrection is really about how faith rose in the hearts of Jesus' disciples, not about how the body of Jesus rose from the dead. But that's nonsense. Faith did not rise in the disciples until they saw and touched the risen Jesus and shared food with him. It was the physical fact of Jesus' resurrection that produced their spiritual faith. But there are faithless leaders today who won't face physical facts. They won't believe the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They say it's too simple and shallow to believe that the physical body of Jesus came back to life and is alive right now. They say that their view of resurrection as a spiritual ideal is much deeper than the belief that Jesus' body was physically raised to life. Of course it's deeper: a grave is deeper than a throne! Let's not be so deep. Jesus' body isn't deep in a grave; he is high on a throne.

The Church's worst enemies are not atheists or members of other religions. The Church's worst enemies come from within. They use positions of leadership to distort and destroy the truth of Christ. They deny the Bible. They deny the real God. They deny the real Jesus. They deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They deny our bodily resurrection. But resurrection is as real as eyebrows and toenails. Resurrection is as real as chin and elbows, nose and ears, as real as mouth and stomach, skin, hair, eyes, cheekbones. Resurrection is not just a spiritual state of mind or a deep feeling of faith. Resurrection is a physical event, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the very center of the Christian faith.

I wish people like Robert Funk and Joseph Sprague were unusual cases, but the truth is that various liberal preachers and professors on church payrolls in various denominations have been saying such things for a long time. They often use Christian-sounding words, but these double talkers give the words different meaning. They don't believe the church's biblical teaching, but they still seek positions of power in the church! People in the pews go on paying their salaries, often not knowing what their leaders are really saying in their books and seminary classes.

Some defend false teachers by insisting on tolerance and absolute freedom of thought. But what if the head of a cancer prevention group urged people to smoke cigarettes? Would he be allowed to stay in his position for the sake of freedom of thought and freedom of speech? No. He'd be effective as an advertiser for a tobacco company, not as the head of a cancer prevention group. Likewise, if a church leader wants to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he's not fit to lead Christians whose entire faith depends on the risen Lord Jesus.

It makes about as much sense for a church to have a leader who openly denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus as it makes for a church to have a known child molester in charge of the church's children's program. The Bible speaks of faithless leaders as "savage wolves" who "distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). The Church stands or falls with the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Sadducee Skeptics

Today's Bible scholars, pastors, and bishops who deny the bodily resurrection aren't the first resurrection skeptics. Back in Jesus' day, there was a group called the Sadducees who were skeptical about resurrection and a lot of other things. The Sadducees controlled the office of high priest and were a majority of the Jewish ruling council (Sanhedrin). They got rich on temple commerce, on the buying and selling of animals, and on the exchange of money at the temple. They maintained control of the religious system by cooperating with Roman rulers. These money-hungry, power-hungry leaders said that "there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit" (Acts 23:8). The historian Josephus wrote, "The doctrine of the Sadducees is this: souls die with bodies." In addition, the Sadducees rejected all Scriptures except the five books of Moses.

The Sadducees did not like Jesus, and they ended up being the ringleaders who arranged his execution. Before things got to that point, they tried to embarrass and discredit Jesus.

Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her" (Matthew 22:23-28).

This was a trick question, an attempt to make resurrection seem ridiculous. The Sadducees thought they had stumped Jesus.

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching (Matthew 22:29-33).

These resurrection skeptics bit off more than they could chew when they tried to trap Jesus Christ and fool him. Let's look more closely at how Jesus refutes resurrection skeptics.

1. Jesus unmasks their presuppositions, showing them to be blinded by bias.
2. Jesus crushes their trick question by showing it to be a dumb question in light of heavenly reality.
3. Jesus shows that the Scriptures reveal resurrection, not only in books written after Moses, but also in Moses' writings (which the Sadducees claim to accept).
4. Jesus rises from the dead!

Unmasking Presuppositions

Jesus unmask their presuppositions, things they assume without question. He says to these Sadducees who deny the resurrection, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God."

Their first bad presupposition is *rationalism*. They don't know the Scriptures. In their view, God's entire Word is not the final standard of truth. Instead, they give the final say to human reasoning.

Their second bad presupposition is *naturalism*. They don't know the power of God. In their view, God's power is not active as the reigning reality. Natural forces are supreme. The Sadducees reject resurrection because it can't happen by natural forces.

Unlike the Sadducees, Jesus knows God's Word as ultimate truth and God's power as ultimate reality. Jesus' presuppositions are totally different from theirs, and he tells them so: "You want to know why you are wrong? Your rationalism blocks you from knowing the truth of God's Word, and your naturalism blocks you from knowing the reality of God's power."

Faith has its own presuppositions. Here is faith presupposition #1: *God's entire Word is the final standard of truth, and it all testifies to Jesus*. As Jesus puts it, "The Scriptures... bear witness about me... There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:39-47) In their rationalism, the Sadducees didn't see that God's Word is the final standard of truth, and they didn't see it was pointing to Jesus. Faith, however, presupposes that the whole Bible is true and points to Jesus.

Faith presupposition #2 is this: *God's power is the reigning, ultimate reality, and it is present through Jesus*. Jesus declares, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). God's kingdom, his reign in power and authority, is right in front of these Sadducees in the person of Jesus. Resurrection can happen because God's power, not natural forces, is ultimate reality. Scripture speaks of "God in whom Abraham believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Romans 4:17). Naturalism wrongly assumes that everything depends on what came before it and on what can be observed. When you live by faith, you realize that God can give life to the dead. Even if nothing at all exists, God can create *ex nihilo*, from nothing. In our time, those who deny God's power in the original creation of the world are often the very same people who doubt or deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. This is because they reject the presupposition that God's power is ultimate and can accomplish whatever he pleases, even what is impossible for natural forces to bring about.

Blinded by Bias

Resurrection skeptics are blinded by bias. Their presuppositions block their ability to believe God's Word and God's power, blinding them to any possibility of resurrection and even making them enemies of resurrection.

Jesus showed his power to raise the dead, even before his own resurrection. A little girl was lying dead in her house. "Jesus went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose" (Matthew 9:25). A young man, the only son of a widow, died and was being carried to his burial. "Jesus said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.' And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother" (Luke 7:14-15). Jesus' friend Lazarus died and lay in his tomb for four days. Jesus stood before the tomb and declared, "I am the resurrection and the life..." Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' The man who had died came out" (John 11:25, 43-44). Again and again, Jesus displayed his power to bring dead people back to life.

But the enemies of resurrection fought back. They met together and said, "'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.' ... From that day on they made plans to put him to death" (John 11:47-48, 53). Not only did the Sadducees want to kill Jesus, but they also plotted to kill Lazarus. "The chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus" (John 12:10-11). These people didn't just have intellectual doubts about Jesus and resurrection; they had a violent bias. It's not that they wanted to believe but found it difficult. Rather, they *hated* resurrection. They wanted to destroy the one who did the raising (Jesus) as well as the one who was raised by him (Lazarus). They were enemies of resurrection.

The Sadducees were blinded by bias. They clung to wrong presuppositions: they didn't know the Scriptures or the power of God. The rationalism and naturalism of their worldly minds sprang out of worldly desires: they wanted to hang on to their income and position. Worldly bias blinded them to God's ruling, resurrecting power in Jesus. Worldly bias blinded them to Jesus' words and actions as signs that he was Savior and God, foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. Their bias blocked them from seeing the reality of God when he was standing right in front of them. Blind bias, rooted in worldliness, made them prefer murder to resurrection. Eventually they succeeded in killing Jesus, but they were not successful in keeping him dead. Even then, however, they remained enemies of Jesus and resurrection. When guards from Jesus' tomb came to the chief priests and told about the earthquake and how they found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, the Sadducee priests paid the soldiers to lie about what happened.

The Jesus Seminar is blinded by bias and wrong presuppositions. They assume skeptical professionals know best. They assume trained scholars who start with skepticism and disbelieve everything the Christian faith says about Jesus are the people most qualified to explain the Bible. Here are some related assumptions of the Jesus Seminar: No prophesy is possible, because nobody can foresee the future. No miracle is possible, because nobody can go beyond natural forces. So when they read in the New Testament of something that fulfills Old Testament prophecy, they assume it didn't happen, because no prophecy is possible. When they read about a New Testament miracle, they assume it didn't happen, because no miracle is possible. They don't try to investigate whether a prophecy was fulfilled or a miracle happened; they already know ahead of time that it *couldn't* happen. They are blinded by bias.

According to a founder of the Jesus Seminar, Robert Funk, "Gospels are *assumed* to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements." Notice that this isn't proven; it's assumed. A co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, John Dominic Crossan, thinks

Jesus' body was buried in a shallow grave and eaten by wild dogs. Crossan is a professional and has a Ph.D., so he must be right! But he has not one shred of evidence for his theory. Not even Jesus' enemies tried to claim that dogs ate the body. But Crossan would rather believe a theory with no historical support or evidence than believe the historical witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Crossan is one of the many people with advanced degrees and important positions who have wrong presuppositions and are blinded by bias.

Back in the mid-1900s, C.S. Lewis charged, "The undermining of the old orthodoxy has been mainly the work of divines [Bible scholars, preachers] engaged in New Testament criticism." Lewis ridicules the notion that these self-appointed experts know better than the biblical writers: "These men ask me to believe that they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can't see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight." Lewis goes on to blast the notion of these scholars, two thousand years after the fact, claiming to know better than the original witnesses who live in the same time and culture as Jesus. "The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous."

Christians must be on guard against some church leaders and scholars who claim to be experts but are really unbelievers and liars. That's not a nice thing to say, but there is no other way to say it. They are unbelievers: they don't believe the cardinal doctrines of the faith. They are liars: they speak falsehood about who Jesus was and is. This is not a new problem. The chief priests of Jesus' day were also unbelievers and liars, resurrection skeptics and enemies of the real Jesus. When they came to Jesus with a trick question, the first thing Jesus did was unmask their presuppositions and show that they were blinded by bias. Likewise, when we Christians today encounter people with titles and credentials and important positions who tell us that Jesus didn't rise, that God isn't personal, that God doesn't answer prayer, and so forth, we can simply reply as Jesus did: "You are wrong because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God."

Revealing Heavenly Reality

After unmasking the Sadducees' presuppositions, Jesus crushes their trick question by showing it to be a dumb question in light of heavenly reality. The Sadducees tell of a woman who was married and widowed over and over, so that she had seven different husbands before she herself died. Who will be her husband in the resurrection? Jesus responds, "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22 :30). Jesus knows the Sadducees don't believe in angels. Too bad for them! Angels are real. When God's people are resurrected and heaven comes to earth, we will be like angels in at least one sense: we won't be married. Marriage is a temporary institution for this life; it will not continue into eternal life. Resurrected people are going to be unmarried, like angels, so the Sadducee's question is vaporized by reality. They are wrong about resurrection and angels.

Earthly questions can seem silly to someone who knows heavenly reality. And nobody knows heavenly reality like Jesus does. He said on a different occasion, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Jesus came

down from heaven to be with us. If you want to stump Jesus about heaven, you have a problem: Jesus knows heaven firsthand; you don't have a clue. You might not believe in angels, but Jesus created and rules the angels! You might not believe in resurrection, but Jesus is the resurrection and the life! When it comes to heaven, angels, resurrection, and the eternal state, nobody knows more than Jesus knows, and nobody can make Jesus look foolish by asking trick questions. Instead, the questioners end up displaying their own ignorance.

Resurrection in Old Testament Scriptures

Next Jesus shows that the Old Testament Scriptures reveal resurrection to anyone paying close attention. The Sadducees did not accept most Old Testament books as Scripture, but since they claimed to believe the books of Moses, Jesus proved them wrong from Moses' writings.

Before looking at Jesus' quotation from God's Word to Moses, let's look at some other Old Testament Scriptures written after Moses that clearly refute resurrection skeptics. Today some scholars claim the Old Testament Scriptures don't reveal anything about resurrection, but those scholars are wrong. The prophet Elijah prayed that a widow's dead son would come to life again. "The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived" (1 Kings 17:22). Something similar happened during the ministry of the prophet Elisha. A boy died, and his mother begged for help. "When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed." Elisha prayed to the Lord and put his body against child's body. First warmth came back into the body, then breath. "The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes" (2 Kings 4:32, 35). After Elisha died and was buried, a funeral procession for a dead man was passing near Elisha's tomb. Some criminals attacked the funeral procession, so the dead man's loved ones fled for their lives. "The man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet" (2 Kings 13:21). These are three clear cases in the Old Testament of people who came back to life again.

Other Old Testament passages speak of the final resurrection, when the body is raised never to die again. Job asked, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14) Job later answered his own question: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26).

King David expressed his confidence to God: "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:10-11). David was speaking as a prophet, pointing ahead to Jesus' resurrection and to the resurrection of all who belong to Jesus.

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words come from Psalm 22, which also says prophetically, "They have pierced my hands and feet." But Psalm 22 goes on to say, "I will tell of your name to my brothers... All the ends of the Earth shall remember and turn to the Lord." The pierced and forsaken one would go on to live and turn people all around the world to the Lord.

God spoke through various Old Testament prophets about resurrection. Through Hosea God said, "Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol [the realm of the dead]? Shall I redeem them

from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting?" (Hosea 13:14) That passage is quoted in the New Testament in reference to the resurrection of Christ and our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). Through Isaiah God said, "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead" (Isaiah 26:19). Ezekiel had a vision of a valley of dry bones coming to life. Then God said, "I will open your graves and raise you from your graves... And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people" (Ezekiel 37:12-13). Daniel wrote, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:2-3).

That's a sample of Old Testament passages concerning resurrection. Some scholars claim that in Old Testament times, it was not part of the Hebrew expectation that there would be a resurrection. That's false. These passages are there for anyone willing to listen.

These passages and others were available to the Sadducee skeptics, but the Sadducees refused to recognize any books as Scripture except the books of Moses. So when Jesus answered the Sadducees, he didn't mention the Old Testament passages I've quoted. Instead, Jesus went straight to Moses, since the Sadducees claimed to take Moses seriously. Jesus told them, "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him" (Luke 22:37-38). To God all are alive! Shortly before this conversation, Jesus was transfigured with heavenly glory and spoke with Moses and Elijah on a mountain. Jesus knew by direct experience that Moses and Elijah were alive. He also knew Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive in their spirit and were awaiting the resurrection of the body as well. When God told Moses at the burning bush, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," he was not claiming to be the God of some long-ago dead people but the God of the living. According to Jesus, even people who believed only the writings of Moses and no other Scriptures should have believed in resurrection, because to God everyone is alive.

But these resurrection skeptics, who claimed to believe Moses, missed the truth found in Moses' writings. They didn't really understand Moses or believe him, so nothing else would convince them either. As Jesus said elsewhere, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Resurrection Reality

Jesus unmasks Sadducee presuppositions, crushes their trick question by revealing heavenly reality, and shows them from the writing of Moses that God is the God of the living. Finally, he does one more thing to refute resurrection skeptics: he rises from the dead!

The church father Jerome must have come across some skeptics in his time who tried to make the resurrection less physical, less real. Jerome wrote,

As Jesus showed them real hands and a real side, so he really ate with his disciples... talked with men with a real tongue... with real hands took bread, blessed and broke it, and was offering it to them. Do not put the power of the Lord on a level with the tricks of magicians, so that he may appear to have been what he was not, and may be thought to have eaten without teeth, walked without feet, broken bread without hands, spoken without a tongue, and showed a side which had no ribs.

Centuries ago and still today, some say it's unspiritual to speak of a risen Jesus who had real ribs and spoke with a real tongue. Let's not try to be more spiritual than Jesus himself. Jesus lives in a glorious resurrection body. Let's face facts that confirm the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

Fact #1: Jesus tomb was empty. His enemies posted soldiers around the tomb to guard the body, but the body vanished anyway. His enemies were unable to produce the body. If they could have, they would have. Instead, they had to come up with a story and bribe the guards to tell a tall tale about the disciples coming and stealing the body. How could they know anybody stole the body? The bribed guards claimed they were sleeping when the body was stolen. If that were true, they couldn't see anything and wouldn't know what happened to the body. The fact is, they were guarding the tomb, but Jesus' body escaped anyway. The guards were "sleeping" only after they fainted because an earthquake and an angel flattened them. But how could they tell that to the chief priests, who did not believe in angels and would not believe in resurrection?

Fact #2: Eyewitnesses said they saw Jesus alive--more than 500 in all. The New Testament gospels tell of some of the women closest to Jesus who found his tomb empty and then met Jesus alive. Peter, John, and the other apostles were doubtful at first, but then they saw and touched Jesus and ate with him. Even Thomas, the most skeptical disciple, was convinced when Jesus came and invited Thomas to touch him. The risen Jesus also appeared to others beyond his small inner circle. Jesus appeared to more than five hundred at one time, says Paul, "most of whom are still alive" (1 Corinthians 15:6). At the time the New Testament books were being written, there were hundreds of people who could testify to seeing the risen Lord.

Fact #3: Eyewitnesses suffered persecution and death rather than change their story. If the disciples had stolen the body and lied about Jesus rising, they would not have been willing to die for a lie. Jesus' followers were fiercely persecuted, yet they refused to change their story. Even when tortured and executed, they went to their death saying they had seen Jesus alive. James was killed with a sword. Peter was crucified upside down. Paul had his head cut off. Other apostles were also killed. Of the apostles, only John avoided being executed for his faith, and he was exiled on a prison island. In the face of terrible threats, abuse, and killing, they continued to insist that Jesus Christ had come back to life and appeared to them. They refused to deny this for one simple reason: they knew Jesus really did rise, and they really trusted and loved him.

Fact #4: Millions of people have experienced the same power that raised Jesus. The living Jesus has given countless people forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and power to live a new life. We who are Christians know God's Word and God's power.

The Sadducees didn't. Jesus told them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." Resurrection skeptics may sound smart, but they do not know

what they are talking about. They have never heard God's voice in Scripture speak to them. They have never felt God's hand of power upon them. They have never met the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so they are unable to face the facts. Their bias blinds them. But if you are willing to face facts, consider these: Jesus' tomb was empty. Hundreds of eyewitnesses saw him alive. These eyewitnesses chose to be tortured and killed rather than deny they had seen Jesus alive. Ever since then, the risen Lord Jesus Christ has come to many people by the touch of his Holy Spirit and transformed them in ways that a dead teacher never could do.

Resurrection Living

How can we be in tune with resurrection realities rather than being resurrection skeptics? Through resurrection living in at least four areas: Bible reading, prayer, faith, and focus.

1. Bible reading: Immerse yourself in biblical presuppositions. Fill your mind with the Bible's way of thinking. Robert Funk read the Bible during his academic career, but he did not submit himself to the thought patterns of the Bible, the patterns of God's creation and God's revelation, the patterns of atonement and payment for sin, the patterns of transformation and resurrection. He studied the Bible but only to pick it apart, not to be guided by it, so he never benefited from it. Many other people don't have biblical presuppositions because they don't read the Bible in the first place. People who don't know the Scriptures are easily fooled by skeptics and opponents of Christianity. The best way to fortify yourself against the claims of unbelievers is to have your mind saturated by the truth and reality of God.

2. Prayer: Depend on God's power. Again remember the Sadducees. They were in error because they didn't know the Scriptures *or the power of God*. If you want to be the opposite of that, know the Scriptures and the power of God. A major way to know God's power is by depending on it constantly in prayer. A life of Bible reading and prayer will strengthen your convictions about the resurrection and make you less vulnerable to skepticism.

3. Faith: Believe the resurrection facts, and trust the living Lord Jesus as the guarantee of your own resurrection. Faith is not just a dive into the dark based on no evidence whatsoever. Faith recognizes facts: the empty tomb, the many witnesses, the trustworthiness of witnesses who kept testifying despite persecution, and the transformation of millions by the risen Jesus. While faith recognizes facts, faith also goes beyond mere facts to personal trust. So believe these facts, but also trust the living Lord and relate to him as your ruler and friend, knowing that you share in his resurrection and eternal life.

4. Focus: Aim for your resurrection future, not worldly status. Our beliefs are often shaped by our desires. A desire for eternity makes it easier to believe in eternal things, but worldly desires foster worldly beliefs. The Sadducees' desires focused on money and status, so their minds had little room for belief in angels or resurrection. They saw Jesus as a problem and wanted to get rid of him. Likewise, some unbelieving scholars and pastors continue in their positions because they desire money and status, not because they love Jesus or desire God and eternal life. Don't let worldly desires blind you to resurrection reality. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:1-2).

Keep your focus on the Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection life, not just on what will make you feel more comfortable for the next little bit of time you spend in the world.

May God preserve his church and protect us from the lies of resurrection skeptics. May we always believe in Jesus' resurrection and ours. May we always profess and live the truth of the Apostles Creed: "I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. Amen."

Resurrection Skeptics

By David Feddes

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Resurrection Skeptic Robert Funk

“Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense.”

Why mention Robert Funk? He sounds like just another grumpy unbeliever. But his career was as an influential Bible scholar.

- Chair, Vanderbilt Religion Department
- President, Society of Biblical Literature
- Founder and Director, Scholars Press
- Founder, The Jesus Seminar

No God, no creation, no fall

“There is not a personal god out there external to human beings and the material world.”

“The demise of a geocentric universe took the doctrine of special creation with it.”

“Death is not punishment for sin, but is entirely natural.”

No miracles, no prayer

“The notion that God interferes with the order of nature from time to time in order to aid or punish is no longer credible, in spite of the fact that most people still believe it. Miracles are an affront to the justice and integrity of God, however understood. ”

“Prayer is meaningless when understood as requests addressed to an external God for favor or forgiveness and meaningless if God does not interfere with the laws of nature.”

Demoting Jesus

“We should give Jesus a demotion. It is no longer credible to think of Jesus as divine.”

“A Jesus who drops down out of heaven, performs some magical act that frees human beings from the power of sin, rises from the dead, and returns to heaven is simply no longer credible. The notion that he will return at the end of time and sit in cosmic judgment is equally incredible.”

No virgin birth or atonement

“The virgin birth of Jesus is an insult to modern intelligence and should be abandoned. In addition, it is a pernicious doctrine that denigrates women.”

“The doctrine of the atonement—the claim that God killed his own son in order to satisfy his thirst for satisfaction—is subrational and subethical. This monstrous doctrine is the stepchild of a primitive sacrificial system.”

Jesus did not rise

“Jesus did not rise from the dead, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense. The meaning of the resurrection is that a few of his followers—probably no more than two or three—finally came to understand what he was all about. When the significance of his words and deeds dawned on them, they knew of no other terms in which to express their amazement than to claim that they had seen him alive.”

No final resurrection

“The expectation that Jesus will return and sit in cosmic judgment is part and parcel of the mythological worldview that is now defunct. Furthermore, it undergirds human lust for the punishment of enemies and evildoers and the corresponding hope for rewards for the pious and righteous. All apocalyptic elements should be expunged from the Christian agenda.”

No biblical revelation

“The New Testament is a highly uneven and biased record of orthodox attempts to invent Christianity... The canon should be a collection of scriptures without a fixed text and without either inside or outside limits, like the myth of King Arthur and the knights of the roundtable or the myth of the American West.”

Robert Funk: “Jesus did not rise from the dead.”

- Chair, Vanderbilt Religion Department
- President, Society of Biblical Literature
- Founder and Director, Scholars Press
- Founder, The Jesus Seminar

Chicago Methodist Bishop: Joseph Sprague

- “God is not a supreme being out there in the beyond. Rather, the word ‘God’ is the sound image we humans employ to point to the very essence of it all.”
- As “the essence of it all,” God infuses everything with the “Jesus power,” “the Christ essence,” which “drives creation’s evolution.”
- “Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe himself as John suggests.”
- “Jesus did not possess trans-human, supernatural powers.”
- “I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot believe that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical body.”

Sadducee Skeptics

- Sadducees controlled the office of high priest and were a majority of the Jewish ruling council (Sanhedrin). They got rich on temple commerce, and maintained control by cooperating with Roman rulers.
- “Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit.” (Acts 23:8)
- “The doctrine of the Sadducees is this: souls die with bodies.” (Josephus)
- Sadducees rejected all Scriptures except the five books of Moses.

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” (Matthew 22:23-28)

But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matthew 22:29-33)

Refuting resurrection skeptics

1. Jesus unmaskes their presuppositions, showing them to be blinded by bias.
2. Jesus crushes their trick question by showing it to be a dumb question in light of heavenly reality.
3. Jesus shows that the Scriptures reveal resurrection, not only in books after Moses, but also in Moses’ writings.
4. Jesus rises from the dead!

Unmasking Presuppositions

“You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.” (Matthew 22:29)

1. **Rationalism:** God’s entire Word is not the final standard of truth.
2. **Naturalism:** God’s power is not active as the reigning reality.

Jesus knows God’s Word as ultimate truth and God’s power as ultimate reality.

Faith Presupposition #1

God’s entire Word is the final standard of truth, and it all testifies to Jesus.

The Scriptures... bear witness about me... There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:39-47)

Faith Presupposition #2

God’s power is the reigning, ultimate reality, and it is present through Jesus.

If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matt 12:28).

...God in whom Abraham believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Rom 4:17)

Resurrection power displayed

Jesus went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. (Matthew 9:25)

Jesus said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. (Luke 7:14-15)

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life...” Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The man who had died came out (John 11:25, 43-44).

Enemies of Resurrection

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” ... from that day on they made plans to put him to death. (John 11:47-48, 53)

The chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (John 12:10-11)

Blinded by bias

- Sadducees clung to wrong presuppositions.
- Worldly bias blinded them to God’s ruling, resurrecting power in Jesus.
- Worldly bias blinded them to Jesus’ words and actions as signs that he was Savior and God, foretold in OT Scriptures.
- Blind bias, rooted in worldliness, made them prefer murder to resurrection.
- Blind bias chose to lie about empty tomb.

Jesus Seminar Presuppositions

- Skeptical professionals know best.
- No prophecy is possible.
- No miracle is possible.
- “Gospels are **assumed** to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is embellished by mythic elements.” (Robert Funk)
- Co-founder John Dominic Crossan thinks Jesus' body was buried in a shallow grave and was eaten by wild dogs at some point between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism

The undermining of the old orthodoxy has been mainly the work of divines engaged in New Testament criticism... These men ask me to believe that they can read between the lines of the old texts; the evidence is their obvious inability to read (in any sense worth discussing) the lines themselves. They claim to see fern-seed and can’t see an elephant ten yards away in broad daylight.

The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous. (C. S. Lewis)

Refuting resurrection skeptics

1. Jesus unmaskes their presuppositions, showing them to be blinded by bias.
2. Jesus crushes their trick question by showing it to be a dumb question in light of heavenly reality.

Heavenly reality

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (Matthew 22:30)

- Angels are real. (Take that, Sadducees!) Resurrected people will be like heaven's angels in at least one way: unmarried.
- No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (John 3:13) Jesus knows firsthand.

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Old Testament Scriptures

The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. (1 Kings 17:22)

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed... The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. (2 Kings 4:32, 35)

The man was thrown into the grave of Elisha, and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet (2 Kings 13:21).

If a man dies, shall he live again? I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. (Job 14:14, 19:25-26)

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:10-11)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ... They have pierced my hands and feet... I will tell of your name to my brothers... All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord. (Psalm 22)

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death?
O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? (Hosea 13:14)

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. (Isaiah 26:19)

I will open your graves and raise you from your graves... And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. (Ezekiel 37:12-13)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:2-3)

Even Moses showed this!

But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him. (Luke 22:37-38) [Jesus had just talked with Moses & Elijah]

If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. (Luke 16:31)

Refuting resurrection skeptics

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Resurrection Reality

“As Jesus showed them real hands and a real side, so he really ate with his disciples... talked with men with a real tongue... with real hands took bread, blessed and broke it, and was offering it to them. Do not put the power of the Lord on a level with the tricks of magicians, so that he may appear to have been what he was not, and may be thought to have eaten without teeth,

walked without feet, broken bread without hands, spoken without a tongue, and showed a side which had no ribs.” (Jerome)

Facing facts

1. Jesus’ tomb was empty.
2. Eyewitnesses said they saw Jesus alive—more than 500 in all. (1 Cor 15)
3. Eyewitnesses suffered persecution and death rather than change their story.
4. Millions of people have experienced the same power that raised Jesus. We know God’s Word and God’s power.

Resurrection Living

1. **Bible reading:** Immerse yourself in biblical presuppositions.
2. **Prayer:** Depend on God’s power
3. **Faith:** Believe the resurrection facts, and trust the living Lord Jesus as the guarantee of your own resurrection.
4. **Focus:** Aim for your resurrection future, not worldly status.