

Easter 2026

The Greatest Story Ever Told

April 5, 2026



You know, I get asked—and it's a good question around this time—"Chip, what do you think about Easter and having to do all the services and coming up with messages and everything?" And the answer is: I really genuinely love Easter, but I may love it for a different reason than you would think. I mean, don't get me wrong—I love the electricity in the air. I love the fact that everybody comes to church. I love all of those things. But the reason I love Easter personally—and if you know me well, you'll know that this is true—the reason I love Easter so much is because it's the one time out of the entire calendar year, out of 52 weeks, it's the one time—I'd like to say every church, but I'm sure there are outliers—I've got to say the majority of churches, all across the world, all across America, for that one week, they actually make the main thing the main thing. And that's what I love about it.

I love it because no matter where you go, you're going to hear something about the resurrection. And the resurrection is what Christianity hinges on. Christianity hinges on the resurrection. Let me explain that a little bit. Let's just assume for a minute that you and I could get into a time machine and we could go back a few thousand years and we could meet a guy named Moses, and we could walk up with him on a mountain and we could see the Lord give him the Ten Commandments. If we could go back to the Valley of Elah and we could watch David slay Goliath with our own eyes. If we could go back and meet a guy named Noah and go, "Dude, that is a big boat. Wow, you're actually getting all the animals on there." If you could go back and do all of those things, and you could verify all of those things, and you could substantiate all of those things that they were true—if Christ didn't rise from the dead, they mean nothing.

And you say, "Chip, how could you say such a thing?" I don't—Paul said it. He said: **"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile."** It's meaningless. It's really interesting to think that Paul wouldn't have said, "If Christ hasn't been risen from the dead, then why not go back into Judaism?" He doesn't say that. He says that it's futile.

Now what's maybe even more powerful is the fact that the person who wrote that line—years before he wrote that line—he was Saul of Tarsus. And nobody doubts whether Saul of Tarsus lived. Agnostic, atheist, Christian, non-Christian—anybody who studies the first century—Saul of Tarsus lived. Nobody doubts that. And what we know is—and it's great when there are some consensuses in the academic and scholarly world about somebody—we know some things about Saul of Tarsus. Like we can absolutely say some things about Saul of Tarsus that we call our historical consensus—that the majority of people who study the first century, no matter where they come from, whether they're

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Christian, non-Christian, atheist, agnostic, there are some things that we can say about Saul of Tarsus that we know to be true.

The first one is that he was a highly educated Jewish Pharisee. He knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards. Not only was he highly educated, but he was zealous, which means if they would have had a way in which they sort of had a valedictorian, he would have been that person. He was zealous for his tradition. And we also know something about Saul of Tarsus—he was a fierce opponent of Christianity. He didn't just oppose Christianity—he hated Christianity. He hated it. It was heretical. It was horrendous. It needed to stop.

And we know that because Paul—in **Acts 7**—was present and approved of Stephen's stoning, the first Christian martyr. He said, "Kill him. Kill him for what he believes. What he believes is so wrong—kill him." Not only that, but he actively sought Christians to arrest them to make sure that they were locked up and probably punished and probably—more than Stephen—killed. That's who he was.

You've got to ask yourself the question—I mean, you have to, if you're just being honest with that—you have to ask the question: What happened? How could somebody like Saul of Tarsus jettison their entire belief system, change everything they believed, and start following the very thing that they hated, and they persecuted, and arrested people, and approved of their death? What happened? How in the world did Saul of Tarsus become Paul the Apostle?

In fact, what makes the most sense, if we look at what we have, we look at the data, we try our best to assess what's going on—what makes the most sense, or what's the most plausible explanation for how Saul became Paul?

Now, when you do that in scholarship, and you're trying to go back and look at somebody in antiquity and figure out who they are and all of those things, what you do is you start interacting with all of the various resources that you have and the various sources that you have that actually talk about that person. Typically, there's somebody that is writing about them, or they're writing about something that somebody else wrote about them. So you're second source or third source away from the person. And then you have to ask the question, were they trying to have a bias in the way that they wrote? Were they trying to have a slant? And you put all that together, and you do all that work, and then you sort of put it together and you have a synthesis that you say, "Well, this is what we think about this person." And then you find out, when you've done all that work, that there's five or six or 20 or 40 other people that have done the exact same work that you've done, and they come to a different conclusion than you do with the data that's in front of you.

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But where it's golden—where it is golden—when you're studying someone of antiquity is when you have a primary source in which you know they are the ones that wrote this themselves. Because then you're able to go, "Okay, we're not talking about what this person said or this second person said. We're actually reading what this person had to say." And nobody in scholarship, regardless if they're Christian or non-Christian, doubts that Paul wrote First Corinthians. Nobody doubts that. In fact, the scholarship is pretty clear. The authenticity of First Corinthians is undisputed. There's no serious doubt that Paul wrote First Corinthians. The authenticity of First Corinthians is universally acknowledged. It doesn't make a difference if you're Christian, non-Christian, secular, atheist, agnostic—people who study the first century, they all agree Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. He wrote it probably somewhere in the middle of 50 AD—50, 53, 54, 55 AD—somewhere in there, 18 to 20 years after Jesus's death. Nobody doubts that.

So when we can go back and look at a source like that that we know Paul wrote, maybe in that source he may tell us something about himself that might help us to understand what in the world happened that this guy changed from Saul of Tarsus to the Apostle Paul. And so we're going to look at a short portion of scripture here that Paul has written. Lean in here, and let's look at it together and hear what he had to say, and maybe we'll learn something about him. Maybe we'll learn something about what was so radical about his life that changed him from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the Apostle.

He says, "**I delivered to you...**" In other words, he's like a courier. It's like a postman. He said when he visited Corinth—this is before he wrote this—he visited Corinth and he planted a church. You've got to go, "What in the world? What happened that Paul would take this group that he persecuted and now he's planting churches?" Like, what happened to this guy?

He says, "**I delivered to you as of first importance...**" In other words, of all the things that I could have said, this was the primary thing. He says, "**I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.**" That's an important word there: received. This is not his—He's giving them something. He's reminding them of what he gave to them when he came and visited them.

And what's great here is that there's pretty much universal acknowledgment that what he received, he delivered to them. And what we're going to read in the next few verses is what almost anybody who studies First Corinthians—whether Christian or non-Christian—will agree: this is an early Christian creed. In other words, he's saying, "Hey, I delivered to you what I was taught." Early on in Paul's life, he went to Jerusalem. The apostles would have taught him this. This was like the creed that Christians memorized. It was like their elevator speech that they had.

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Like, for instance, if you go here to Grace Community Church and you've been here for a little bit, you know that Grace Community Church exists to reach the unchurched by being intentional neighbors that reflect Christ. That's the elevator speech. You don't have to be here for a long time—you just know that. You see it when you walk out, and then you can tell people. And they say, "Hey, you go to Grace Community Church. What's that church all about?" Well, we reach the unchurched by being intentional neighbors that reflect Christ. And then they say, "What does that mean?" Well, let me tell you what the unchurched means and what this means. It's your speech. It's your elevator speech.

The early Christians had an elevator speech. They had the thing that they would go in and they would lead with—not like today's Christians that will get on all kinds of stuff and argue about everything else. They had it down. They knew what they were going to say. And Paul says, "If you remember when I delivered to you what I received, and it was of first importance..."

And then he's going to tell us this creed. And scholarship is in agreement that this tradition was formulated within months of Jesus's death. The next guy I'm going to quote to you—his name is Gerd Lüdemann. He is an atheist. He says that the elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion, no later than three years.

So at the latest, it's two or three years. Earliest is maybe a couple of months. Paul is citing a formal, structured tradition, probably from the Jerusalem church—early. Most scholars agree that this creed dates to within a few years of Jesus's death. Nobody disagrees with that. Nobody disagrees that within the first couple of years after Jesus had died, if you were a Christian, this is what you said. This was your creed. This was what you taught. Here's the creed. He says, **"I delivered to you of first importance what I received."**

Here's the speech. **"Christ died for our sins..."** You come into a town—Christ died for your sins. He died like other people on a cross, yes, but his death was different. His death, when he died, it was for our sins. You've got to think—what happened to Paul that he would say something like this? A man who considered it to be heresy. What happened?

He says, **"I delivered this to you that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures."** With the Scriptures, that's the Old Testament. They didn't have the New Testament at this time. What in the world happened that Paul the Pharisee, who would have known the Old Testament inside and out and would have known that it was written about the Jewish people, God's chosen people, is now saying that, "Oh yeah, the Scriptures—They talk about Jesus dying"? Like, what happened?

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Like, there must have been something really amazing that happened to Saul of Tarsus for him to teach this creed to the church at Corinth.

The creed goes on. We're not done with the creed. He says Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures, **“that he was buried...”** That was important in early Christianity that they didn't want you to think somehow that he didn't die. They buried him. He was buried. **“And that he was raised on the third day...”**—third day. Once again, **“in accordance with the Scriptures.”** This is the creed. People walk into a town—they're Christians—this is what they said. They didn't come in and say, “Let's talk about did Adam have a belly button or not?” or “Should women be able to wear pants?” You know how we are—Christians can be crazy. We lead with everything other than the main thing. This is the main thing. This is what they led with: Christ died for your sins, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. This was the creed.

And then the creed had another part to it, where people had experienced the creed. He died, buried, rose again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. And then **“he appeared to Cephas.”** Cephas is the Aramaic. You're used to the Greek, which is Peter. This is the guy that denied Jesus, that went in hiding. Something happened to Cephas—to Peter—that changed his life, that he would preach on the day of Pentecost, that he would give his life. When Nero took Peter's life, he was to be crucified. Peter said, “I will not allow myself to be crucified like Jesus because I'm not worthy to be crucified like Jesus. Please crucify me upside down. I'm not even worthy to hang the same way that he did. Crucify me upside down.” What happened? What happened?

You're smart people. You're intelligent people. You can look at that and go, “What's the most likely thing that would that Peter would do what he did and die for that truth?” What's the most likely scenario that he saw a dead man walking? That's the most plausible scenario. The creed says, “Hey, Jesus died. He was buried. He was raised again. And Peter saw him alive.”

Not only that, but **“the twelve.”** The twelve is like a name for the group that sort of leads, because you know Judas is not in the twelve anymore. So, they're eleven. Then Matthias comes in. It's just a name. But Jesus appeared to the twelve. They saw him. Changed their lives.

Not done with the creed. Then **“...he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time.”** They would walk into town and say, “Listen, Christ died for your sins according to the scriptures. He was buried and he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. And Peter saw him alive. And the twelve saw him alive. And over 500 brothers saw him at one time.” Then Paul has to give a little addition to the creed because the creed's now 18 years old, maybe 20 years old. He

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says most of those 500—they're still alive. You go talk to them. But some of them have fallen asleep. Some of them have died because it's been a little bit of time now.

Think about that. This is what they said. This is the creed. Jesus died for our sins. He was buried, rose again on the third day according to the scriptures. Peter saw him. The twelve saw him. Over 500 brothers at one time saw him. And then **“he appeared to James.”** Why James? James is not part of the twelve. Why did the creed pull James out and specifically mention him? It's a great question. The reason is because James was the half-brother of Jesus. Mary and Joseph, after Jesus was born—it says Mary did not know Joseph until after Jesus was born—they had children. James is the half-brother of Jesus.

I want to ask you a question. You're smart people. What would it take for you to grow up with a half-brother and for you to become convinced that he was the Son of God, God incarnate, that died on the cross for your sins, and that you were willing to give your life as a martyr for that truth? What would have to happen? You're smart people. I don't have to do any smoke and mirrors. You're smart people. The most plausible explanation is that he saw a dead man walking. That's the most plausible explanation, which is why this is the creed. This is what they said. This is why people converted.

You may say, “Well, Chip, that's great, but how do you know? How do you know? Because, you know, I grew up in a church and I never heard anything about Jesus having brothers or sisters or anything like that. How do you know that James was Jesus's brother? that James was Jesus's brother?” Glad you asked. Paul, who wrote another epistle that's not disputed at all to the church at Galatia, recounts his visit to the Jerusalem church early on. And he says that he didn't see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. If you don't like that, you could go to Mark 6, where they're questioning Jesus, and it talks about his siblings. Or you could go to Matthew 13:55, where they're asking questions about Jesus and, “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother called Mary? Are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?” Judas is the one who wrote the epistle in your New Testament called Jude.

Two brothers of Jesus that not only believed that he was the Son of God, that not only believed that he was God incarnate, but were willing to give their lives for that. What is the most plausible explanation? They saw a dead man walking. That's the most plausible explanation. It's not smoke and mirrors. It just makes the most sense. And then he appeared to the other apostles that we don't know their names, but these were other apostles.

That's the creed. Christians walked into a town. They had the creed. They had their elevator speech. It was Christ died for

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our sins according to the scriptures. He was buried. He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, the twelve, then to more than 500 brothers at one time, then to James, and then to the other apostles. That was the creed.

What in the world? How could a guy go from persecuting this, throwing people in jail, to saying, “Of first importance of anything that I can say to you, this is what I said”? Well, because he tells us in the next verse what it was that changed his life. Himself. Not somebody else. Not somebody else writing about it. He tells you. He says, **“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”** That’s what Paul said. Paul said, “The reason I’m doing what I’m doing is because I saw the risen Lord.”

And nobody doubts this. Scholarship is in unanimous agreement that Paul obviously believed that he had seen the risen Jesus. That Paul’s conversion is one of the best-attested facts in early Christianity. Like, nobody even begins to think that Paul didn’t have an experience that changed him. Because what else could explain jettisoning your whole belief system to now becoming a Christian and planting churches and eventually giving your life under Nero’s reign and being beheaded for your belief in Jesus? What’s the most plausible explanation? That he saw a dead man walking. That Jesus actually did rise from the dead.

That’s why when you see Paul in the New Testament, and they’re talking about him preaching and doing what he’s doing—like at a place in Athens where he could have spoken about anything, he could have brought up all kinds of ethical problems, all kinds of stuff—what do we hear Paul do? He preaches Jesus and the resurrection. And the reason that he does is because he knows something. And you know this—you’re smart people. If the resurrection isn’t true, Christianity is meaningless. But if the resurrection is true, then it changes everything. It changes everything.

And then what happens is we sit here and we go, “Well, yeah, man, if that’s true... oh man, that means...” you know, sort of like that Frank Sinatra song, *I did it my way*. And if Jesus is really Jesus... and then what we do is we start to convince ourselves out of it, when it’s the most plausible of all the decisions that you could think of, of how all this happened, is that they saw a dead man walking. But what we do is we start to convince ourselves of something else. We start saying things or we go on YouTube or we listen to people who tell us things that maybe we want to hear. Maybe we don’t know that we want to hear them, but we think that we want to hear them.

And they’ll make statements like this—you can go out there and find it. They’ll say, “Well, Jesus didn’t exist, man. Like, how do you know? Like, how do you know? All these preachers, man,

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they're just preaching about somebody that didn't exist because they just want to build big buildings and they just want your collections and all of this stuff. Don't go to church. Jesus didn't exist. It's all a bunch of junk." Well, you don't have to take my word for it. This is the academic consensus. The academic consensus of those that have combed through the evidence—the view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet. The theory of Jesus's non-existence is now effectively dead as a scholarly question. Jesus of Nazareth existed. The whole idea that he didn't exist is a thoroughly discredited theory. You can believe the guy on YouTube, but the people that have poured through the data will tell you, "Oh, there's no doubt that Jesus existed." It's just not even debated by those people that study this.

Or you may say, "You know, I don't know. I don't think he died. I think this is what happened." Like you were there. "This is what I think happened. I think that when they pulled him down off the cross, they thought he was dead, you know, and they pulled him over to the tomb, and I think that maybe the rock was cold, and when they laid him down on the cold rock, it resuscitated him, popped up—peekaboo—and then they went, 'Oh man, he's resurrected,' and all of this." But the people that have combed through the data say that he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be. That Jesus was executed by crucifixion is a fact universally accepted by scholars.

Like, you can think that. You can gin yourself up to believe whatever you want to believe. Or you could do this one: "Well, I don't think he resurrected. I mean, they probably had some good drugs back then or something and convinced themselves." Not me. The people that have combed through the data say it is a historical fact that some of Jesus's followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution. We can say with complete certainty that some of his disciples at some later time insisted that he soon appeared to them, convincing them that he'd been raised from the dead. It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus's death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ. That Jesus's followers and later Paul had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. It's perfectly clear that all the disciples believed that they had seen Jesus after his death.

Now, this is something you may not know, but it's important that you know. I just gave you some things that people sort of put forward as excuses to not believe. And then I gave you a lot of quotes from scholars. This is important: none of those scholars I just quoted believe in Jesus. Not one of them. Not one of them believe in Jesus. But listen to me—they all agree that he existed, that he was crucified and died,

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and that the disciples sincerely believed that they saw him alive.

Because they know—and so do you, because you're smart people—you know this. It makes the most sense. The most plausible explanation for the reason that Christianity exists is that Jesus rose from the dead.

[Applause]

It's the most plausible explanation. It makes the most sense. It's the one that doesn't have to have smoke and mirrors. It's just as clear as can be that the reason all of this happened, the reason there's a church, the reason there's a New Testament, the reason any of this happened is because they literally saw a dead man walking. Which means this is the greatest story ever told.

And here's the beauty. Whether you grew up in church or didn't, whether you're a believer or not, you've heard the greatest story. You've heard it in one really succinct way. Here's the greatest story ever told: **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** Amen. That is the greatest story.

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And listen to me, because this is for someone. Maybe it's you online. Maybe it's you in the lighthouse room. Maybe it's you in the lobby. Maybe it's you in here. Listen to me—the same Jesus that met Paul is here to meet you today. He's right here. Before the foundation of the world, he knew he would be here and you would hear this message. You say, “Oh, but Pastor Chip, you don't know what I've done. Oh, but Pastor Chip, you don't know how much I've doubted.” Oh really? You think you've arrested people and killed people that are Christians like Paul? You've denied Jesus as many times as Peter? You think that you have a past that God can't forgive? Let me tell you something—God can forgive everybody's past because he died for our sins.

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This isn't just a story about what happened to Jesus. It's a story that can happen to you. Because you know this—you know this—you're smart people. Empires have risen and fallen. Philosophies have come and gone. But an empty tomb still stands at the center of history. Because here's the stone-cold fact—Paul, when he consented at Stephen's death—fact that he voted, probably was a member of the Sanhedrin, which means he would have known everything going on, he would have been aware of all the facts or whatever—this is the reason why things kept going is because nobody could find the body. **“He is not here. He is risen.”**

Which means the question's not, “Is this a great story?” The question is, “Will it become your story too?” The same guy that wrote First Corinthians that nobody really disputes, that also wrote Galatians that nobody really disputes, also wrote a book to the church at Rome and nobody really disputes that either. And in that book, he tells you and me, as clear as day, how we can make it our story too. He says, **“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”**

I've been doing this for a long time, and I'm just at the place where I'm pretty straight up at this point. Why in the world would you walk out of here today and not know that your eternity is settled? You're smart people. Look at the evidence. Why in the world did Christianity—because they saw a dead man walking. Why did they die for their faith? Because they saw a dead man walking. That's not smoke and mirrors. That's not me trying to gin you up to believe something. I'm a hard sell. I've spent my life looking at this. I don't want to be wrong. And I'm telling you right now, there is no other explanation for why Christianity exists, why there's even a New Testament, why there are still churches that are going. The only explanation that makes sense is that people saw a dead man walking.

And if that's true, then that means everything changes. Because that means Jesus is who he says he is. And that means that he is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. That means that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him. Why would you walk out of here? Why would you leave the lighthouse room? Why would you walk out of the lobby? Why would you tune out on the internet and not know that you had settled eternity once and for all?

That means that some of you—and I know this—some of you all, it's just inside, something's pushing at you. That ain't Chip Bennett. That's the Spirit of God moving in your heart. Don't miss the day of your visitation because he's here and he wants to save you. I'm going to give you an opportunity. I'm not going to make you weird, but I am going to give you an opportunity to make a decision. Would you

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please, if you would, would you bow your heads and your hearts for just a moment?

I'm at the place now in my life where I'm just pretty straight. If you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you don't know that you know that eternity is settled, you don't know that you're right with God—you don't know those things—and you go, "I don't want to leave here not knowing." If that's you, I'm going to ask you to do something really bold. Not trying to make you uncomfortable, but I just don't believe in easy believism. I'm going to ask you to do something that pushes you a little bit, but you need to do it. You need to respond.

If that's you, I'm going to ask you to put your hand in the air and hold it there for a minute. If that's you—"I want to leave here knowing." Amen. Come on. This is your chance. Put your hand in the air and say, "I want to know. I want to know for sure." I see those hands. I see those hands. Come on. This is your chance. This is your moment right now. Put that hand in the air between you and God. Not between me and you—between you and God.

And you say to yourself right now where you're at, "God, I heard a message that says that you loved me so much that you sent your Son to die for me. And if I believe in him, if I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead, if I turn my life over to you, I can walk out of here knowing that I have settled eternity once and for all."

If that is you, this is your moment. This is your moment. We're going to sing a song, and as we sing that song, this is the time for you to have that conversation with God. And if you do, please find someone before you leave at the information desk or anybody around that has a lanyard on—let them know. But if you want, during the song and after the song, there will be people down front that will pray with you. They're not weird. They won't make you feel uncomfortable, but they're here to pray with you for whatever you need to pray for—specifically if you want to talk about what it means to follow Jesus.

Father, I thank you for what you're doing here in this church. I thank you for the people that are responding. I thank you, Lord, for the miracles that are happening here in this church right now. And I pray, Lord, that as we sing this final song, I pray that you would hover over everyone and that you genuinely would move in people's hearts for your glory. Lord, as we sing this final song, I pray that there would be some real-life change in people's lives for your glory. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. And everybody said, "Amen."