

Putting First Things First (Building our Faith) The sign of the resurrection--Did Jesus Really Die?

Intro: In our building faith series we are not only responding to some of the arguments that are made by unbelievers against faith and against Christianity in particular; we are also looking at the positive proofs that support our faith in Jesus Christ.

The religion of Jesus in contrast to all other faiths provides a means of verifying its truth claims through God's acts in history.

In our first lesson we saw that it is verified by the remarkable unity of the Scripture.

In our second lesson we saw that it is verified by fulfilled prophecy as God's prophets confirm that their message is from God by predicting the future (Isaiah's prophecies).

Today let's consider that it is also verified by miracles that confirm God's presence and approval of the events and messages proclaimed. This is the claim of John's gospel:

Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (Jn. 20:30-31)

In our next few lessons each month, we'll consider the evidence for the ultimate miracle--the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If it can be shown with reasonable certainty that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead, then we have every reason to put our faith in the gospel that He and His apostles proclaimed. The evidence is there for all to read and to consider. Yet often people do not investigate thoroughly and see the impressive evidence God has given for our faith.

The doctrine of the resurrection hinges on four crucial questions.

Did Jesus really die?

How and where was He buried?

Is there a naturalistic explanation that adequately explains how the apostle's believed and proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead?

Is there adequate testimony from proper sources to confirm His resurrection from the dead?

Did Jesus really die?

What evidence do the gospel writers give us to consider?

The last day of Jesus life was a day of physical fatigue, intense mental anguish, and life-threatening abuse. Let's quickly follow the footsteps of Jesus this final day of life.

Presumably Jesus would have been active during the day on Thursday before his death.

He had met with his disciples in an upper room shortly after sundown to observe the Passover meal. Typically the meal lasted for several hours.

After the meal, Jesus walked with his disciples to the Mount of Olives where Jesus prayed before his capture. It was a time of intense anguish for him.

After prayer, probably somewhere around midnight, he was captured by the religious authorities and taken to Anna's house for examination.

After a period of questioning he was taken to the house of Caiaphas where he was again subjected to intense questioning. After the council reached his judgment of blasphemy, Jesus was physically abused by the soldiers there. It was now likely not long before dawn.

After an early morning meeting of the Jewish council, Jesus was taken to Pilate with the request for execution.

After being examined by Pilate, he was sent to Herod and then sent back to Pilate before he declared his final judgment.

All of this would have been a time of great physical fatigue, intense mental anguish, and life-threatening abuse. Surely Jesus would have been weakened by the sheer stress and distances walked over the course of the past twelve hours.

In keeping with Roman custom Jesus was scourged before the crucifixion took place.

The subject would be tied to a post, stripped of his clothes and then severely whipped by Roman lictors. The whip itself, called the flagrum, would consist of a sturdy handle with long leather thongs of various lengths into which were sewn sharp jagged pieces of bone and lead. (Jewish law limited the scourging to 40 lashes and often those administering the punishment counted only 39 lest they violate the law.)

However, there is no evidence that the Romans would have been so benevolent with their victims. The scourging itself was capable of causing death in some victims.

“When it is determined by the centurion in charge that the prisoner is near death, the beating is finally stopped.” (Truman Davis, M.D.)

“The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” (Eusebius of Caesarea)

Jesus' weakened condition seems to be implied by the fact that Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the crossbeam of Jesus' cross.

McDowell says that the beam itself called the patibulum weighed approximately 110 pounds. Apparently this load was too much for the Lord in his weakened condition.

Thus Simon was conscripted by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross to Golgotha.

The crucifixion involved nailing the Lord to the cross through both the hands and feet. This would have resulted in significant blood loss.

For years it was believed that this detail of the gospel account was false--that the victims were just tied to the cross. But in 1968 an Israeli archaeologist discovered four cave-tombs just north of the city of Jerusalem. They contained 15 limestone ossuaries containing the bones of 35 individuals. One of these was a man named Yohanan. He had lived near the time of Christ and had died by crucifixion. His feet bones were still transfixed by a large iron nail.

Likewise nails were driven through the wrist bones to hold the upper body to the cross. This is what prompted Thomas to say: *“Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe. (Jn. 20:25)*

In Jesus' case, the Roman soldiers, upon examining him, determined that he was dead and consequently did not break His legs.

It was customary for soldiers to break the legs of the victim in order to hasten the death of the subject by making it impossible for him to push himself up in order to breathe; and thus he would die sooner of asphyxiation.

In the case of the man I just described his leg bones were broken; but in Jesus' case they were not.

The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs; (Jn. 19:32-33)

We should not miss the evidential value of this. Soldiers who experience death all around them on the battlefield are quite adept at knowing when someone is dead or alive.

For them, it is a matter of life and death in warfare, since an enemy soldier pretending to be dead could arise and kill again.

Moreover they would want to rescue a fellow-soldier if there was the remotest sign of life or verify their death on the battlefield before committing them to burial.

John saw in this exception a divine purpose.

Fifteen centuries before Jesus lived God had given this unusual prescription in the preparation of the Passover lamb: "not a bone of it shall be broken".

The fact that Jesus' legs were not broken had theological significance. Jesus as our Passover lamb died for us without a broken bone.

But as an additional precaution, they thrust a spear into Jesus' side to confirm his death.

but one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water. (Jn. 19:34)

The mixture of blood and water confirmed that Jesus' heart had ruptured and that his blood had mingled with the congestive fluid that builds up around the heart during crucifixion.

Again this act had theological significance to John. It would fulfill a remarkable prophecy of Zechariah in which God speaks about how His people would treat Him:

"they shall look on me whom they pierced.." (Zech. 12:10).

Jesus' death was confirmed by the Roman centurion who supervised the crucifixion.

After receiving word of Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea requested to Pilate that the body be removed for burial.

However before granting that permission, Pilate asked for official confirmation from the centurion before releasing the body of Jesus to Joseph.

And Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. (Mark 15:44-45)

Jesus' death was confirmed by Joseph and Nicodemus who tended to his burial.

And after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. He came therefore, and took away His body. And Nicodemus came also, who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. (Jn. 19:38-40)

Had there been any sign of life, would these men have continued with their burial ritual? Would they have not called for medical aid and made every effort to keep Jesus alive?

Through all of these confirmations and evidences the fact of Jesus' death is well established. It is inconceivable that Jesus could have survived the physical rigors of His death sentence and all that accompanied it.

Doctrinal significance

Of course, most Christians would not need this detailed evidence to accept at face value what the witnesses of the life of Jesus affirmed about this matter. Yet skeptics have offered the "swoon" hypothesis as a response to Jesus' resurrection, suggesting that Jesus did not die on the cross but only

appeared to be dead. In the coolness of the tomb, he revived and appeared as if resurrected from the dead.

Some have had even philosophical reasons for denying Jesus' death. It has been difficult for some to philosophically accept the idea that what was truly God could be subject to death.

The Docetists of the early church, influenced by Gnosticism couldn't imagine that God was subject himself to the ignominy of death.

Therefore Jesus only appeared to be human and to die.

Muslims likewise affirm that Jesus was neither killed or crucified but made to appear to die and was raised up to heaven by God. They reject the idea of salvation through the blood atonement of Jesus on the cross.

The fact that Jesus really did die as God in human form is essential to the doctrine of salvation. For the gospel affirm:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:9)

Conclusion: That Jesus really died is the first leg of our proof that the resurrection is one of the most well-supported facts of ancient history.

He is risen!