

KNOW WHY YOU BELIEVE
LESSON # 19, 20 21
RESURRECTION: Cornerstone of Christianity

We are moving towards Easter and the subject of our year-long study is “Know WHY You Believe.” We have previously covered WHAT Christians believe, including the resurrection, so now we’ll talk about WHY we believe. Some of the ground we cover will repeat the facts of the resurrection, but over the next couple of weeks we’ll work our way through this article that tells us what the resurrection is, as well as why we believe Jesus rose from the dead.

The best way to approach this study is to have a student read through the article and then stop at each scripture reference having another student read it and then perhaps talking about it for a moment...

The goal of reading together is to have some interaction together as we explore the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We’ve also provided some tapes for you that you may want to listen to.

Read and explore the article together over the next three weeks and try and get to the end. The week before Easter, we’ll be studying the customs and origin of Easter traditions.

"... if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile;
you are still in your sins!"
(1Cor 15:17).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. But what actually happened in 30 AD? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Or does some alternate theory best explain what is know about that important year? This article will look at the evidences for the resurrection and evaluate alternate theories.

General Reliability of the Gospels

Before looking at the resurrection itself, the general reliability of the four Gospels included in the New Testament needs to be considered. They accurate records of the life and teachings of Jesus.

First, the writers assert to be writing literal history (Luke 3:1f).

They claim to be either eye-witnesses of the events or to have received their information from eye-witnesses (Luke 1:1-4; John 19:35).

In studies of other ancient documents, historians still abide by "Aristotle's dictum that the benefit of the doubt is to be given to the document itself."

John Warwick Montgomery explains, "This means that one must listen to the claims of the document under analysis and not assume fraud or error unless the author disqualifies himself by contradictions or known factual inaccuracies" (Montgomery, p.29).

It is outside the realm of this paper to present a detailed account of how archeology has confirmed the Gospel records. However, one example that will be important in later discussions will be presented.

Luke records the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus as occurring during the "... reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea" (Luke 3:1). He also states that Pilate conceded to the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23:24).

These statements are upheld by the Roman historian Tacitus (AD 55-117). He writes, "... Christ had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate" (Tacitus, p.365).

Secondly, the Gospels were all written in the first century. The first three Gospels are traditionally dated between 50-65 AD and the Gospel of John 80-95 AD (Criswell, pp.1327, 1498).

However, some have doubted this first century dating of the Gospel of John: ... radical criticism has attempted to date its composition during the middle or end of the second century. Such a view, however, was decisively refuted by the discovery in Egypt of the Ryland's papyrus fragment, which documents the circulation of the Gospel c. AD 135. The book must, therefore, be dated in the first century, and there is no compelling reason for rejecting the traditional view (Criswell, p.1498).

Given the first century dates, hostile eye-witnesses would have discredited the Gospel writers if they were recording inaccurate histories. However, there is no record of this occurring.

Background Information

Accepting the Gospels as being accurate records for non-supernatural events still doesn't prove the resurrection occurred. For this question, it needs to be ascertained whether any other theory adequately explains all the facts known surrounding the death and burial of Jesus and subsequent events. Following is a list of some of the points needing explanation.

Death of Jesus Christ:

All four Gospel writers record the crucifixion of Jesus (Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:33; John 19:18).

The Gospels are also clear in saying Jesus was dead before He was taken off the cross (Matt 17:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30).

John records that a soldier made sure of this fact by piercing Jesus' side with a sword (John 19:34). Mark says Pilate double-checked with the centurion to be sure Jesus was in fact dead before releasing the body (Mark 15:44f).

Josephus was a Jewish historian who lived from 37-100 AD. He also mentions Jesus' crucifixion (Josephus, p.379). This passage has been hotly contested. Some believe the early Christians altered the passage. This belief has arisen because the passage appears too "Christian" for a Jew to have written it. However, an Arabic manuscript omits the questionable passages while retaining the phrase, "Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die" (quoted in Habermas, p.92).

The Jewish Talmud (70-200 AD) records, "On the eve of the Passover, Yeshu (Hebrew for Jesus) was hanged" (Quoted in Habermas, p.98). "Hanged" is used in the NT to describe crucifixion; so there is no contradiction (Luke 23:39; Gal 3:13).

Lucian, a second century Greek satirist writes of the early Christians that they, "...worship the crucified sage" (Quoted in Habermas, p.100).

So there is Jewish, Roman and Grecian collaborating evidence for the fact of Jesus' crucifixion. In these passages, there is not even a hint that Jesus was taken off the cross before he was dead.

Even if Jesus had been still alive when He was taken off the cross, the chance for His survival would have been slim. In 66 AD Josephus, "Discovered three of his friends being crucified. He asked the Roman general Titus to reprieve them, and they were immediately removed from their crosses. Still two of the three died any way" (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.49).

Burial of Jesus Christ:

When Jesus' body was taken down, it was bound in linen cloths with a hundred pounds of spices (John 19:39f).

This Jewish burial custom would have included covering the face (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.92). If He wasn't dead already, the covering of His face and the spices would have snuffed out any flicker of life left.

He was then laid in a new tomb and a large stone rolled in front (Matt 17:60).

The Jews, remembering Jesus' prediction that He would rise from the dead, asked Pilate to provide a guard (Matt 27:62-66).

Greek scholar A.T. Robertson states that the grammar of verse 65 makes it clear that a guard of Roman soldiers was provided, "... not mere temple police" (Robertson, Vol. I, p.239).

A Roman guard consisted of 4-16 men and, "... was probably one of the greatest offensive and defensive fighting machines ever conceived" (McDowell, *Resurrection*, p.55). Further, a Roman soldier falling asleep on duty would be punished by death (McDowell, *Evidence*, p.213).

Jesus' Empty Tomb:

Despite the above precautions, on Sunday morning following the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was empty. Again, all four Gospel writers record this fact (Matt 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:5f; John 20:2).

Further, there was great excitement over bodies missing from tombs in Judea in the first half of the first century. This fact is known due to the discovery in Nazareth of a decree of Claudius (reigned 41-54 AD). It reads, "Ordinance of Caesar. It is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain perpetually undisturbed In case of violation I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulchre" (Habermas, p.155).

The death penalty for grave robbing? Something must have happened in Israel to cause this kind of reaction from the emperor. Could it have been the missing body of Jesus and the subsequent preaching of the resurrection?

Records of the Resurrection:

Every Gospel describes appearances of Jesus to the disciples after He had been crucified (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20;21).

Luke, in the Book of Acts, writes of Jesus and the apostles, "... to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Paul also records a list of resurrection appearances in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1Cor 15:3-8). This passage is particularly important. It pre-dates the writing of the Gospels themselves. The epistle itself was written around 56 AD (Criswell, p.1622).

Preaching of the Resurrection:

The Book of Acts records the preaching activity of the apostles. It centered on the claim Jesus Christ had risen from the dead (Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-15; 10:34-43).

This preaching activity is confirmed by extra-biblical sources. Josephus states, (Arabic version) "They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive" (quoted in Habermas, p.92).

Tacitus records, "But in spite of this temporary setback (the crucifixion) the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea, where it had started, but even in Rome" (Tacitus, p.365).

The Tacitus quote is also important in that it again confirms Luke. The Book of Acts records that the resurrection was first preached in Judea, more specifically Jerusalem (Acts 2). This is near the very place where Jesus had been crucified and buried (John 19:38-42).

Finally, the disciples were so convinced Jesus had risen, they continued to preach the resurrection despite persecution and martyrdom. Luke records the slaying of James the apostle (Acts 12:2).

Josephus describes the stoning of James the Just (Josephus, p.423).

Clement, a disciple of the apostle Paul, wrote an epistle to the Corinthians about 95 AD (see Phil 4:3).

In the fifth chapter, Clement recounts the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (Lightfoot, pp.3,59). John the apostle left a record of his own banishment in Revelation 1:9.

According to tradition, the other apostles were all also persecuted and martyred for the faith (Knechtle, p.116). This type of fortitude in men who formally forsook and denied Christ needs to be explained (Matt 26:56,69-75).

Growth of Early Church:

The preaching of the apostles met with great success. The Christian movement grew rapidly despite the persecution. This growth is recorded in Acts and verified by the previous quote by Tacitus.

Tacitus also adds detailed descriptions of the horrendous persecutions the early Christians suffered (pp.365f). These points are also mentioned by Suetonius (secretary to emperor Hadrian, 117-138 AD) and Pliny the Younger (Roman historian, 112 AD; Habermas, pp.89f,95)

Change in Day of Worship:

And finally, the early Christians moved their day of worship from Saturday to Sunday. The Church was initially exclusively Jewish. At that time, Jews had been worshipping on Saturday for 14 centuries. Something dramatic must have happened on a Sunday to cause this change in a centuries long tradition.

