

Does the Evidence For the Resurrection Offer Proof That Jesus Rose From the Dead?—Part Two

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How does the death of Jesus give evidence for the Resurrection?

If it can be established that Jesus died, then if He was seen alive after His death, no one can logically doubt He resurrected from the dead.

That Jesus really died is doubted by no objective observer familiar with the evidence. The first proof that Jesus died is the public nature of the execution. Dr. Bernard Ramm points out:

Certainly Jesus was put to death in a great public execution known to such historians as Tacitus and Josephus. The execution was in the capital of the Jewish commonwealth under the direction of the Roman governor and his soldiers, in cooperation with the highest Jewish authorities, and during one of the great religious seasons. Jesus certainly died.... According to the gospels the grave-owner was known, the type of burial is known, its location was known. When Pilate set a watch over the grave he indicated its locality to friend and foe alike.¹

If we examine ten details of the crucifixion we can better understand why no one ever doubts that Jesus really died:

Detail 1: Jesus was crucified publicly according to standard Roman practice (John 19:18). Standard Roman practice was both severe and chillingly efficient. Condemned criminals were deliberately placed on public display as a warning to all men that they must obey Roman law and authority. Thus, the events were very plain and very public: a squad of four Roman executioners put Jesus to death in view of a large crowd.

Detail 2: The soldiers maintained a careful watch below the cross as indicated by their casting lots for Jesus' garments. Matthew mentions "they *kept watch* over him there" (Matthew 27:36) and that "the centurion and those with him... were *guarding* Jesus" (Matthew 27:54). Crucifixions were so horrible that guards were absolutely necessary lest family and friends remove the man from the cross and spare his agony and torment. Further, part of the soldiers' sworn duty was to make certain the condemned prisoners died (Matthew 27:36, 54).

Detail 3: Dozens of Jesus' friends and enemies actually watched Him as He died upon the cross. Everyone present heard His death cry (Mark 15:39-41; John 19:25-30, 34).

Detail 4: The crucifixion occurred on Friday. However, it was against Jewish law for the body of a condemned man to remain on the cross on the Sabbath day (Saturday). Therefore the Jews requested of Pilate that the prisoners' legs be broken so that they would immediately suffocate to death (John 19:31). They could therefore, according to Jewish custom, be removed from the cross before the Sabbath began at 6 P.M. Friday.

Detail 5: Pilate granted the request and the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men on Jesus' side (John 19:32).

Detail 6: But these same soldiers, who were from practice accustomed to determining whether a crucified man was dead or alive, immediately recognized that Jesus was dead:

“When they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs” (John 19:33, cf. v. 36; Numbers 9:12; Psalm 34:20).

Detail 7: Because it was unusual, if not rare for a man to die this quickly, to be doubly sure Jesus was dead, emphatic steps were taken. A soldier pierced Jesus’ side with a spear “and immediately there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). This is medical confirmation that the sword had pierced Jesus’ heart and that Jesus had already died.²

Detail 8: Pilate had the centurion *reconfirm* that Jesus had died. The only basis upon which Pilate could, by law, release the body to Joseph of Arimathea was to verify the death of Jesus: “[He]...went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate was surprised to hear that He was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph” (Mark 15:43c-45).

Detail 9: The commanding centurion had personally heard Jesus’ death cry and also seen the spear thrust into His side (Mark 15:39; John 19:34).

Detail 10: Jesus’ death was directly observed by the Apostle John who recorded the entire series of events, including the spear thrust, the death cry and all the rest. John immediately stated, “And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe” (John 19:35).

In other words, John wanted to be absolutely sure that his readers understood Jesus *had* died on the cross. Because Jesus had died, there was simply no way to account for the subsequent Resurrection appearances than the Resurrection itself.

Consider all that Jesus went through. He underwent six trials,³ which included beatings and scourging. This alone killed some men. He carried the heavy beam of the cross, or part of it, to His crucifixion site. He underwent all the horrible tortures of the crucifixion itself. He had a Roman sword thrust through His side, piercing His heart. His death was then confirmed by Roman soldiers. It was then confirmed again by the centurion himself to one no less than Pilate. To think Jesus never died is ludicrous.

Consider one description of a typical crucifixion:

The condemned man was invariably scourged, and men were known to die under that punishment alone, so severe were the wounds inflicted by this cruel cat-o’-nine-tails inset with pieces of metal. It is possible that Jesus suffered this punishment both from the Jewish and from the Roman authorities (Matthew 26:67f; John 19:1). Thereafter, he had to carry the *patibulum* of his cross, and was led out under armed guard to die.

There was a variety of ways of fixing the condemned man on the cross.... Commonly the cross was put together on the ground, the condemned man bound or nailed to it, and the whole thing then erected and dropped into a pit that had been prepared to receive it. The degradation of the criminal was completed by his very clothes being taken from him. He was exposed naked on the cross. The cause of his being there was written above his head and fixed to the cross; and he was left there to die slowly in intense agony from exhaustion, thirst, and wounds.

The criminal had, of course, no recourse but to curse, spit and urinate on his tormenters. Often the kindlier execution squads would offer a draught of drugged wine before nailing the man up. This went some small way towards dulling the pain.... Heart and lungs were put under immense strain by the position of the crucifixion. When the torture was deemed to have gone on long enough, or in order to ensure that the man was dead, the soldiers would perform the *crurifragium*, or breaking of the legs. This meant that the man, if still alive, could

no longer hoist himself and would soon expire.

The physical effects of crucifixion were appalling. Of all deaths it is the most lingering and agonising. The unnatural position of the body made every movement a pain. The suspension of the whole body on jagged iron nails (one dating from AD. 50 has recently been discovered in Jerusalem) driven through the most sensitive nerve centres of the wrists and ankles, insured constant exquisite torture. The wounds of the nails and the weals from the lash soon became inflamed and even gangrenous. The body's position hindered circulation and caused indescribable pain in the chest. A raging thirst set in, brought on by the burning sun. The flies were thick around the victim. The agony of crucifixion was terrible beyond words.⁴

Survival from crucifixion was unknown; just as today, men simply do not survive the firing squad, electric chair, lethal injection or gas chamber. Because the law had decreed the prisoner's death, even if a first attempt did fail, procedures would be repeated until death occurred. But death from crucifixion was just as certain as any modern method of execution; there was no escape:

I know of only one instance in ancient literature which is remotely comparable. Josephus (*Vita*, 75) tells of a time when he saw a number of captives being crucified; and, noticing three of his friends among them, he asked Titus, the Roman commander, for a reprieve. This was granted, and the men were taken down at once. It seems that they had only just been crucified, but despite being given every care by the most expert physicians available, two of the three died.... There can be no doubt that Jesus was dead.⁵

Merrill Tenney, whose Ph.D. is from Harvard, observes that the centurion that commanded the execution squad of Calvary was in all likelihood a man of superior intellect. This is because centurions in the Roman army were experienced soldiers, specially selected for their ability and alertness. Because of their experience on the battlefield and at executions, the Roman centurions were experts in the art of killing and knew how to determine if a man was dead.⁶ The centurion's comment that "truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39), while a significant comment for a pagan unbeliever, shows by the tense of the verb "was" that in his judgment, Jesus was already dead. Indeed, had he given a false report of this fact to Pilate, it would have cost him his life.

Those who removed the body and buried it would certainly have noticed any life on Jesus' part. Had He been alive, they certainly would not have *buried* Him; they would have done all in their power to save Him. But all the accounts agree that Jesus was buried according to Jewish custom with 75 pounds of spices and linen.⁷

All of the above, especially the public nature of the execution, is one reason it took at least 1,800 years before someone proposed the nonsense that Jesus really didn't die on the cross. No one could possibly have put forth such a theory on the day of the crucifixion itself.

All four evangelists say the same: Mark says that Jesus died (Mark 15:37); Matthew says Jesus died (Matthew 27:50); Luke says Jesus died (Luke 23:46); John says Jesus died (John 19:30). The fact is repeated a dozen times in the Acts and the Epistles that "Christ died."

In conclusion, there is absolutely no doubt that Jesus Christ *died* on the cross. But He was later seen *alive* by dozens of eyewitnesses in many different locations over a period of 40 days. How can this be explained apart from the Resurrection?

(to be continued)

Notes:

- ¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1971), p. 186.
- ² Pierre Barbet, M.D., *A Doctor at Calvary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963); E. Symes Thompson, M.D., *On the Physical Cause of the Death of Christ*.
- ³ Clifford Wilson, *The Trials of Jesus Christ* (Melbourne, Australia: Pacific College of Graduate Studies, 1986).
- ⁴ Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 22-23, cf. Dr. E. Symes Thompson, *On the Physical Cause of the Death of Christ*.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ⁶ Merrill Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 106.
- ⁷ 100 Greek *liters* (John 19:39; 12 ounces each).