

## Questioning the Cross: Honest Questions to Strengthen our Faith

### Week 2: Did Jesus Really Die?

I. Last week I did get asked a good question, not totally in line with the message, but sort of. The question was this: Why don't we observe Lent? It's a great question and one for which I didn't have a solid answer. Lent is the 40 days leading up to Easter which has historically been observed by the Big "C" Church as a time of reflection and sacrifice in preparation for Easter. Like any human tradition there can be misses with Lent in two directions: one being a legalistic approach, but two where we miss the opportunity to think intentionally and deeply about the death and resurrection of our Lord. Even though I (Tab) don't talk about Lent as much as some of the more liturgical expressions of faith, I pray this series:

[Slide]: Questioning the Cross

is helpful in orienting our hearts and minds to the Easter season in which we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the overall big picture of the series that we're currently in. And as we mentioned last week, questioning something isn't limited to the idea of trying to debunk something. Because we live in a skeptical culture, we often think questioning something implies a negative angle. That doesn't have to be the posture of questioning though. We can question something in an attempt to strengthen our understanding. So, wherever you are on the spectrum of faith, I hope you'll engage over the next several weeks with the series and consider these questions so vital to the faith.

A. Today's topic is going to form a bridge in the series as we continue questioning the cross. There's a bit more history for us to consider when it comes to the crucifixion and that history will then transition into theology as we consider the question:

[Slide]: Did Jesus really die?

1. Other world religions must deal with Jesus in some capacity. When history is marked according to someone's life or death (B.C. or A.D.), it's extremely difficult to deny that person existed. Even secular scholars that mark time by B.C.E or C.E., can take Jesus out of the name but the delineation is still there! So, one of the ways that the Jesus dilemma (from the perspective of those skeptics or other religions) is resolved is by denying the physical death of Jesus. The foundation of Christianity is faith, not faith blind to the facts, but faith nonetheless. Therefore, I don't believe in speaking derogatively about other people's beliefs. We can disagree with other people, adhere to our convictions, and do so in a respectful manner. But in the pluralistic (all roads lead to heaven) world we find ourselves in, to not express the very real differences between faith in Jesus and other religions, seems to be a foolish approach on all fronts. And one of the significant differentiation points resides in what one believes regarding the physical death of Jesus.

2. How important is this question?

a. According to the World Atlas there are 1.7 billion people on the planet currently practicing Islam. Islam is based off the teaching of the Quran and the Quran has a substantial amount of information regarding Jesus or Isa. Again, I'm not belittling anyone's beliefs, I'm simply educating on the differences. Here's what the Quran states about the crucifixion:

Surat Al-Nisa 4:157 [Slide]: That they said [in boast], "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah," but they killed him not, nor crucified him. Only a likeness of that was shown to them. And those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no [certain] knowledge. But only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.

b. The most rapidly growing "religion" in the U.S. is the Nones. Nones (not the Catholic variety but n-o-n-e-s) disavow any religious affiliation but still must do something with the historical evidence of the life of Jesus. This question isn't likely on most nones's minds, but in academia it certainly is. Particularly what caused the early Church to give rise if their leader stayed in the tomb?

c. Dr. Trevor Lloyd Davies is a modern medical doctor who has written extensively on the crucifixion and has this quote in the Baylor Medical Review:

[Slide]: The abuse meted out to Jesus in the Praetorium led to his collapse and early removal from the Cross, and to resuscitation. Individual and corporate suggestibility among the disciples and the women explains the reports of subsequent appearances. This hypothesis accepts the historical events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus but explains what happened in the light of modern knowledge.

3. We can deny the views that are contrary to what the Bible claims or we can dive in and question the cross. We can look at the history recorded in God's Word and see that the footing of our faith is strong! You guys know I'm a huge Tolkien fan and I love this quote in Lord of the Rings:

J.R.R. Tolkien [Slide]: It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.

I can't speak for you, but I don't want to be a Christian confined to a holy huddle because I'm afraid to step out boldly with the faith. I certainly don't want to raise children to be afraid of the world, but good gravy they had better be prepared! It's a dangerous business going out your front door. Let's not be passive in our study of the Word. Let's engage with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Luke 23 starting in verse 44:

Luke 23:44-46 (CSB) [Slide]: 44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three, 45 because the sun's light failed. The curtain of the sanctuary was split down the middle. 46 And Jesus called out with a loud voice "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit." Saying this he breathed his last.

Luke 23:47-48 (CSB) [Slide]: 47 When the centurion saw what happened, he began to glorify God, saying, "This man really was righteous!" 48 All the crowds that had gathered for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, went home, striking their chests.

- a. Luke gives us an eyewitness account of the death of Jesus Christ. There is no question about the nature of what's being presented by the Biblical text. One may question the Bible, but we can't say the Bible is ambiguous on what it presents regarding the crucifixion of Jesus.

[Slide]: Jesus physically died!

- b. How do we know?

Last week we read Mark's account and there are some similarities to Luke and some differences. Some look at the different gospel accounts and think they've caught the Bible in a contradiction. It's almost hysterical (not historical 😊) when this is brought up. If God wanted to produce 4 gospel accounts that were exactly the same, He could have built an advance 1st Century computer and printer and popped them out just like that. But He didn't! The Word of God is inspired through the Holy Spirit but passes through the very real grey matter of the author's human brain!

The gospels don't refute one another; they build on one another.

Luke identifies two public phenomena signaling God was making His presence known and He was doing so by way of wrath. We talked a little bit about darkness falling on the land last week from a historical perspective, but what was God doing from a theological perspective?

[Slide]: Signaling judgment.

Judgment that was prophesied in Amos 8:9-10:

Amos 8:9-10 (CSB) [Slide]: 9 And in that day- this is the declaration of the Lord God- I will make the sun go down at noon; I will darken the land in the daytime. 10 I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation; I will cause everyone to wear sackcloth and every head to be shaved. I will make that grief like mourning for an only son and its outcome like a bitter day.

God was pouring out His wrath on His One and Only Son appeasing the justice of God and there was only one adequate sacrifice. For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23) Jesus died a sinner's death not because He was sinful but because He willingly incurred the wrath or judgment of God.

- (1) We see that expressed in the gospel accounts of Jesus's crucifixion through God manifesting His wrath through darkness.

(2) Secondly, the temple veil was torn in two! This wasn't a bed sheet, but a curtain made of Babylonian wool as thick as a hand! In other words, it would have taken a supernatural act of God to rip this curtain or veil in two. And that's what happened! We'll talk about the atonement or the sacrificial nature of Jesus's death next week. The temple veil may come up in other weeks, but Luke is uniting the tearing of the veil with Jesus's final breath not to emphasize the atonement as much as a new era was being ushered in. The dominion or authority that Satan had over sin and death was being appeased in the righteous death of God's Son. The Holy of Holies nor the Temple would contain Him. Under the New Covenant, God would unleash His Spirit throughout the earth, but it was the victory of Jesus through death on the cross that would usher in the New Covenant marked by God's grace. God's grace would come through the remission of sin and the remission of sin is only possible through the shedding of blood. (Hebrews 9:22)

c. In the final moments of the crucifixion there are two statements made by Jesus. One we saw last week in Mark and the other here recorded by Luke. In these two statements we see the humanity and the Deity of Jesus displayed even through the torture of crucifixion.

(1) In Mark we hear Jesus cry out:

Mark 15:34 (CSB) [Slide]: 34 "My God, my God why have you abandoned me?"

We think about the physical nature of Jesus death but at His moment of greatest despair it was the realization that God the Father had poured out His wrath and there was for a brief time a broken relationship between the Father and Son that had existed co-eternally in perfect fellowship as Father, Son, and Spirit. This abandonment is what pierced Jesus more than anything physically.

(2) But in His moment of greatest despair with everything left Jesus had in Him, He leaned faithfully into the Father:

Luke 23:46 (CSB) [Slide]: 46 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit." Saying this, he breathed his last.

Jesus the 2nd Person of the Trinity physically died, and He died obedient and faithful to the very end. How could He die with the full brunt of God's wrath upon Him and remain faithful to the end? He entrusted His Spirit to the Father in the face of death! He was confident of the resurrection! But resurrection only comes by way of death. Luke expresses the death of Jesus through the Greek word:

[Slide]: ἐξέπνευσεν.

"Exepnusen" is the active indicative verb form of "ekpneo" which served as a euphemism in the ancient world for death. In its literal sense it means to expire. Jesus wasn't made unconscious for you and me by the wrath of God. Jesus physically died under the weight of God's wrath because He loved the Father and us to that extent.

d. We talked about the centurion last week and how he marveled at the unfolding events.

Luke lets us know that the crowd who had shouted to have Jesus crucified and accompanied the executioners that day:

Luke 23:48 (CSB) [Slide]: 48 Gathered for the spectacle.... went home beating their chests.

This was no ordinary execution and all those present that day recognized it before the event concluded. The crowd gathered in a violent frenzy but after witnessing the events unfold left sorrowful.

e. In case there is any remaining doubt about the physical death of Jesus, the events that transpire next are amazing. You don't name drop like this unless a story can be validated! Buckle up!

Luke 23:50-54 (CSB) [Slide]: 50 There was a good and righteous man named Joseph, a member of the Sanhedrin, 51 who had not agreed with their plan and action. He was from Arimathea, a Judean town, and was looking forward to the kingdom of God. 52 He approached Pilate and asked for Jesus's body. 53 Taking it down, he wrapped it in fine linen and placed it in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever been placed. 54 It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

Let's break this down nice and simple. Pastor Mike reminds us often, "We're at the right place, at the right time, with the right people."

Do you know that the testimony of Scripture from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 demonstrates it can be shown of God that He too is “always at the right place, at the right time, with the right people!”

(1) I did some research this week on an area of Scripture that I didn't know much about. I had a decent handle on the Pharisees and the Sadducees. These groups are mentioned frequently in the gospels and represented the legislative or law-making class in 1st Century Israel. They didn't agree on everything but generally got along to get along and maintain their position.

They weren't the top of the food chain though. Who held that position?

A very tight circle of men known as the:

[Slide]: Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin served very much like our Supreme Court does today. They were the highest court in the land. Now if one is to fake the death of someone to develop a myth, you better be careful on who your alibis are!

(2) As God would have it, who does He have in position to corroborate these critical events so crucial to our faith:

[Slide]: Joseph of Arimathea and Pilate!

A supreme court justice and the top Roman official of the day! Only God could unfold a plan that amazing! Just like God the Father prepared for the incarnation, God the Father took care of the Son even in death as He awaited resurrection. One of the most remarkable witnesses in Scripture is there to preserve Jesus's physical body from death to resurrection, Joseph of Arimathea.

A rich, powerful, and righteous man! Someone needs to write a book about that dude!

4. In order for there to be a resurrection, there had to be a physical death.

Jesus Christ died and was placed in an empty tomb.

It was attested to by the soldiers that crucified Jesus and by the women that accompanied Him faithfully after the disciples deserted Him. But the women were not the only ones to witness the death of our Lord.

Pilate and Joseph the supreme court justice bore witness to it too. That is substantial evidence!

II. The story doesn't end here. Easter is coming! But let's not forget that resurrection and life pass through the doorway of death. That's the price that's been paid so that we might be buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4)

A. It's a great thing for us to consider the facts but please don't let it end there. Let the facts translate into faith. God orchestrated an unfathomable plan to redeem sinful humanity and draw sinners like you and me into a personal relationship with the living God. Come to God today trusting that Christ Jesus died physically for you in order to pay your sin debt. And was resurrected offering us new life in Jesus!