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Who, What, When, Where, Why, How of the Christian Experience

LESSON # 19

RESURRECTION: Cornerstone of Christianity



OBJECTIVE: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an essential doctrine of the Christian faith. But what actually happened in 33 AD? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Or does some alternate theory best explain what is known about that important year? This article will look at the evidences for the resurrection and evaluate alternate theories.

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.

Read and explore the article together over the next three weeks and try and get to the end.

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

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).

Luke 3:1-2

¹ *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--* ² *during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.*



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They claim to be either eye-witnesses of the events or to have received their information from eye-witnesses

Luke 1:1-4

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

John 19:35

³⁵ The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.

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).

Luke 23:24

²⁴ So Pilate decided to grant their demand.

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).



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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).

Matthew 27:35

³⁵ When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Mark 15:24

²⁴ And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

Luke 23:33

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left.

John 19:18

¹⁸ Here they crucified him, and with him two others--one on each side and Jesus in the middle.

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).



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Matthew 17:27

²⁷ "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

Mark 15:37

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Luke 23:46

⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

John 19:30

³⁰ *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

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).

John 19:34

³⁴ *Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*

Mark 15:44-45

⁴⁴ *Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.* ⁴⁵ *When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.*

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).



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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).

John 19:39-41

³⁹ *He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.*

⁴⁰ *Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. ⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.*

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).

Matthew 17:27

²⁷ *"But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours." The Jews, remembering Jesus' prediction that He would rise from the dead, asked Pilate to provide a guard*

Matthew 27:62-66

⁶² *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know*



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how." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

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).

Matthew 28:6

⁶ *He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.*

Mark 16:6

⁶ *"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.*

Luke 24:5

⁵ *In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"*

John 20:2

² *So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"*

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).



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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).

Acts 2:22-36

²² "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. ²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, ²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'" ²⁹ "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand ³⁵ until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" ³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."



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Acts 3:12-15

¹² When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?

¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

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).



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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).

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).

Philippians 4:3

³ *Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

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.

Revelation 1:9

⁹ *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

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).

Matthew 26:56

⁵⁶ *But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*

Matthew 26:69-75

⁶⁹ *Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. ⁷¹ Then he went out to the gateway, where another girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

⁷² *He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" ⁷³ After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away." ⁷⁴ Then he began to call down curses on himself and he swore to them,*



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"I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

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.

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