

SERIES: THE CASE FOR CHRIST

Sermon 2: Exploring the Evidence for Christ – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

[Play Sermon 2 Video Bumper]

We continue to live in the light of the resurrection and focus on that event in our series called *The Case for Christ*, and we encourage all of you to be sure to see *The Case for Christ* movie, which helped inspire these messages. It's a great film that chronicles the spiritual journey of Lee Strobel, the award-winning journalist who went from being an ardent atheist dead set on disproving Christianity to becoming a confident follower of Christ.

That's why, as you see in *The Case for Christ* movie, Strobel honed in with such a laser focus on the question of whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. He recognized that this issue is, as some have called it, the lynchpin of Christianity. If the evidence for the resurrection stands, then the Christian faith stands; but if the evidence falls, then so does Christianity—which is the outcome Strobel was hoping for.

The apostle Paul, by the way, acknowledged the pivotal nature of Jesus' resurrection in the Bible. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." In fact, he went on to explain that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then we, as Jesus' followers, are hopelessly lost and, as Paul put it in verse 19, "of all people most to be pitied."

So this is a really big deal! This is really important stuff! But, as Lee Strobel asked in the movie, is there any real evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? That's the question we're going to explore today.

Much of the information we'll talk about today comes from Strobel's hours of research, reading, talking to experts, and searching Scripture. There are incredibly intelligent people who commit their whole lives to studying and understanding these issues. The historical sources are many and the arguments can get complex, so we obviously can't cover everything today.

But—good news—we can boil down the issue of Jesus' resurrection to three simple questions: ***First, was Jesus alive at Point A?***

Second, was Jesus dead at Point B?

And third, was Jesus alive again at Point C?

If the answer to these three questions is *yes*, then Jesus *did* rise from the dead, He *is* the Son of God, and Christianity *is* true! So let's dive into the evidence for these three claims.

Jesus Was Alive at Point A - Virtually every scholar, secular and Christian, agrees Jesus actually lived in the first century. Even so, the Internet is alive with the claim that Jesus never lived at all. More than that, there are claims that Christianity is a copycat religion that stole its beliefs from earlier mythology. In other words, people say the resurrection of Jesus never happened—it's merely a story Christians plagiarized from ancient myths.

This idea was popularized by the book and movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, which said, “Nothing in Christianity is original.” But even *that* idea wasn’t original—it was recycled from writings by skeptics in the nineteenth century, who influenced Vladimir Lenin, and consequently became dogma in the former Soviet Union.

When it’s first presented, the evidence for this claim sounds strong. But, here’s the truth, as summarized by Swedish scholar T. N. D. Mettinger: “The nearly universal consensus of scholars around the world is that there are no examples of any mythological gods dying and rising from the dead that came before Jesus. These resurrection myths came *after* Christianity, so Christianity could not have done the borrowing.” He added, “There is, as far as I am aware, no *prima facie* evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct.”

And what about those who try to deny that Jesus ever lived? Well, even Bart Ehrman, the agnostic New Testament scholar who’s no friend of Christianity, wrote a book attacking that idea. He said, “The claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground.” LCMS historian Paul Maier is even more blunt: “The total evidence is so overpowering, so absolute that only the shallowest of intellects would dare to deny Jesus’ existence.”

Friends, there’s no question about the first question in our investigation: *Jesus was alive at Point A*. And so we move on to the second point.

Jesus Was Dead at Point B - For the resurrection to be true, Jesus had to really die. The Bible and history tell us he was executed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. But some deny the death of Christ, including most of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims who cite a verse in the Qur’an [Surah 4:157-158]. So who is correct? Once again, we turn to historical evidence for the answer.

It’s been said that we’re lucky in the study of ancient history if we have one or two solid sources to confirm a fact. In the case of the execution of Jesus, however, we not only have reports in all four accounts of Jesus in the Gospels, but we also have five ancient sources *outside* the Bible: Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Mara Bar-Serapion, and the Talmud.

Besides - the cruel, degrading, and humiliating killing of their leader on a cross would not have been something that Jesus’ followers would have invented if it were not true.

The Muslim teaching that Jesus didn’t die on the cross comes from Muhammad’s claim, six hundred years after Jesus lived, that an angel in a cave told him it wasn’t true. No historical evidence was offered, and the eyewitness accounts were ignored.

Set aside religion for moment—just purely from a historical standpoint, where does the evidence point? Clearly to the crucifixion of Jesus. And as for the question of whether Jesus could have lived through his suffering on the cross, the evidence shows there’s no way Jesus survived the efficient brutality of Roman execution. Jesus was tied to a post and beaten dozens of times with whips that had jagged bones and balls of lead woven into them. Dr. Alexander Metherell said a witness described Roman floggings like this: “The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles and tendons and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.”

Jesus was in hypovolemic shock—or shock from a great loss of blood—and in critical condition after the beating. Then spikes were driven through his wrists and feet. Crucifixion is an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation, because the stress on the chest locks the lungs into the

inhaled position. To exhale, the victim has to push up to lessen the stress. He would push up and sag down until exhaustion took over, and he would die from the effects of not being able to breathe. Then a soldier plunged a spear between Jesus' ribs, puncturing his lungs and heart, and the expert Roman executioners confirmed that he was dead.

In the movie, Lee Strobel pursues Dr. Alexander Metherell in order to investigate this very subject. Let's watch this clip from the movie...

[Play Video 2: Exploring the Evidence for Christ]

Did you hear what Strobel read from the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in this scene? It is convincing information. The article said, "Clearly the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted. . . . Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

It's not just Christian scholars who believe this. Agnostic New Testament scholar James Tabor said, "I think we need have no doubt that given Jesus' execution by Roman crucifixion, he was truly *dead*." Even the atheist New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann said, "Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable."

So we have powerful and persuasive evidence that *Jesus Was Alive at Point A and Dead at Point B*. Now for the most astounding claim:

Jesus Was Alive Again at Point C - There are two strands of evidence that establish that Jesus came back to life: that *his tomb was empty*, and that *he appeared to people*.

Jesus' body was laid in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. The tomb was sealed, and Matthew says it was guarded—yet it was discovered empty on that first Easter morning.

So how do we know the tomb was empty? **First**, there's the **Jerusalem Factor**. Scholar William Lane Craig pointed out that the site of Jesus' tomb was known to Christians and non-Christians alike. If the claim was false, if the tomb was not empty, it would have been highly unlikely for a movement founded on Jesus' resurrection to explode or even exist in the same city where Jesus had been publicly executed. The critics of Christianity could have simply opened his tomb and shown that Jesus' decaying body was still there. This would have effectively ended the Christian faith.

Second, there's the **Criterion of Embarrassment**. Who discovered the empty tomb? Women, right? But in first-century Jewish and Roman culture, the testimony of women was not considered reliable. They were generally not even allowed to testify in a court of law. In fact, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, who worked for the Romans, wrote this: "But let not the testimony of women be admitted."

So here's the point: If the Gospel writers were going to make up the story about the empty tomb out of thin air, they never would have said *women* discovered it empty. Culturally, this was embarrassing and would hurt their cause. They would have said a man—Peter or John, for instance—discovered the tomb empty. Yet they reported that it was women who found the

tomb vacant. Why? Apparently because that's what happened, and they were committed to reporting the truth, even if it was embarrassing or hurt their cause.

Third, there's ***Enemy Attestation***. In other words, even the enemies of Jesus admitted the tomb was empty. What were skeptics saying in Jesus' day? They were saying the disciples stole Jesus' body. This was reported by Matthew, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian. But why would they say someone stole the body if it was still in the tomb? They're implicitly admitting the tomb was empty by trying to explain how it *got* empty. This is just a cover story. Even the enemies of Jesus admitted the tomb was vacant.

The real question is: How did the tomb get empty? The Romans weren't about to steal the body; they wanted Jesus *dead*. The Jewish leaders weren't about to steal his body; they wanted Jesus to *stay dead*. The disciples didn't have the motive, means, or opportunity to steal the body. Besides, we have seven ancient sources affirming that the disciples lived lives of deprivation and suffering as a result of their proclamation that Jesus had risen. Why would they have done that if they knew it was all a lie?

Of course, the empty tomb alone isn't enough to establish that Jesus was alive again. Thankfully, we also have the *numerous appearances of the risen Jesus* to a variety of people in a variety of settings. And get this: We have *nine ancient sources* confirming that the disciples were convinced Jesus had risen and that he appeared to them.

1. In the Creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, the apostle Paul proclaimed, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

Evidence shows Paul was given this creed one to six years after the crucifixion—but most probably between 34 and 36 AD! By then, it was already in creedal form, and therefore the beliefs that make up the creed go back even further! Historian James Dunn concluded, “This tradition, we are confident to say, was formulated as tradition *within months* of Jesus' death.”

So there's no big time gap between the death of Jesus and the subsequent development of a legend that he rose from the dead. This is like a *news flash* that goes right back to the scene! This is historical gold.

2. Our second ancient source is Paul's testimony about the disciples. Paul came to know some of the apostles personally, including Peter, James, and John. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:11, regarding resurrection, that “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed.” So Paul was confirming the belief of the disciples that they encountered the resurrected Jesus, too.

3. Sermon Summaries in Acts: Peter said in Acts 2:32: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.” Three thousand people agreed—and the church was born.

4, 5, 6, and 7. The Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John confirm that the disciples encountered the risen Jesus.

8, 9. Finally, we have the testimony of some early church fathers who knew the apostles personally and heard what they taught about the resurrection. Clement, who was ordained by Peter, wrote a letter to the Corinthians in the first century, saying: “[The apostles had] complete certainty caused by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And Polycarp, who was appointed by John as bishop of Smyrna, wrote a letter to the Philippians in which he mentioned the resurrection no fewer than 5 times. Referring to Paul and the other apostles, he said: “For they did not love the present age, but him who died for our benefit and for our sake was raised by God.”

So here we have nine ancient sources that reflect multiple early testimonies to the disciples’ conviction that they had encountered the resurrected Jesus. The evidence is powerful and persuasive—and, I might add, almost overwhelming. But think about *that*. We have overwhelming evidence to back up our faith!

So, let me sum up what we’ve learned:

Jesus Was Alive at Point A.

Jesus Was Dead at Point B.

Jesus Was Alive Again at Point C.

Jesus really did rise from the dead, and this proves that he was who he claimed to be—the unique Son of God. It means his teachings have authority for our lives today. And it means he has opened heaven to everyone who will receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life he purchased for us on the cross.

So why? Why did he do it? You might remember from a scene in the movie, in which Strobel was looking at the replica of the Shroud of Turin, and asked the priest that very question. And the answer given was *love*. The God of the universe loves you and me with such intensity and power that he willingly entered our world and endured torture and death in order to redeem us.

I hope you’ve encountered that love and forgiveness with God. If not, please talk with me or the friend or family member you’re here with this morning. And together let’s keep exploring the evidence for Christ and allow its truths to penetrate our hearts and strengthen our faith each and every day. In Jesus. Amen.