

Truth Series: Lesson 5

Did Jesus Really Die on the Cross?

Life Question:

How do I know Jesus really died?

Scripture:

Matthew 27:45-50; Matt 27:50-54; Matthew 28:3; Mark 15:43-45

Key Passage:

Matthew 27:45-50

Reality Impact:

Students will learn the evidence that Jesus died on the cross.

Materials needed:

Napoleon Dynamite Video

I. Prayer:

II. Introduction:

- a. **Illustration:** Video Clip—Napoleon Dynamite
Napoleon and his uncle, Rico, began to argue. The argument resulted in a fight—ending with Rico throwing steaks at Napoleon.
 - i. **Application:** Death hits you in the face. It happens and it's done. No turning back. Most people aren't ready for it.
- a. **Review:** For the past four weeks, we've discussed:
 - i. The accuracy and authenticity of the Bible
 - ii. The truth of the Bible
 - ii. The evidence that God exists
 - iii. The evidence that Jesus is the Christ
- b. **Scripture:** Matthew 27:45-50
 - ⁴⁵From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
 - ⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."
 - ⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30

⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.
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- c. **Transition:** We've read about crucifixion in the Bible. We've seen crucifixion in plays at church. Many of us have heard about crucifixion so often that we've become numb to its horrors. We forget that crucifixion was excruciating. The Romans developed and perfected it until it became the most torturous form of death during that time period. Crucifixion victims usually experienced a combination of asphyxia, dehydration, and congestive heart failure. Death by crucifixion took days, and the Romans excelled at making it the most miserable experience possible.

III. **The Crucifixion**—Christ endured crucifixion, died, and rose from the dead three days later. The latter presents a problem for skeptics of Christianity. If Christ rose from the dead, then He is truly the Son of God. Many of these critics have found it easier to claim that Christ never died on the cross. That way, He never rose from the dead. Tonight we will focus on these skeptics' claims. First, we need to understand exactly what happened to Christ according to the Bible.

- a. **Beaten**—Jesus was beaten several times before He was crucified.
- i. Jesus was struck in the face by an official in the house of Annas (The father-in-law of Caiaphas, the High Priest. (John 18:22)
 - ii. Once Jesus declared He was the Messiah before the Sanhedrin, the temple guards:
 1. Blindfolded Him
 2. Spit in His face
 3. Struck Him with their fists and slapped Him
 4. Beat Him in general
 5. And demanded that He prophesy and tell them who beat Him. (Matthew 26:67, Mark 14:65, Luke 22:63-64)
 - iii. After the Roman guards flogged Jesus and crowned Him with twisted thorns, they:
 1. Put a purple robe on Him
 2. Spit on Him
 3. Struck Him on the head with a staff—again and again
 4. Struck Him in the face
 5. Ripped the robe off His freshly whipped back. (Matthew 27:30, Mark 14:19, John 19:3)
 - iv. These are only the recorded beatings.
- b. **Flogged**—When the Romans flogged a victim, they used a cat-of-nine-tails—a whip with nine leather straps. At the end of each leather strap was a ball of

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leather with bits of bone, iron and chain—anything that would poke a hole in your tire—stuck in it. Each time the whip fell on the skin of the victim, it tore out flesh, muscle, and pieces of bone—and you can believe that the Romans knew exactly how to use the whip to inflict the most pain. Many people died of flogging alone.¹ The victim was usually flogged with thirty-nine lashes—depending on the mood of the executioner.²

- c. **Crown of Thorns**—They also shoved a crown of thorns on Jesus' head as a joke. Anyone who has jumped into a thorn bush would find the joke less than funny, and you can bet that the Romans didn't gently set it on Jesus head.
- d. **The Cross Bar**—Jesus bore either His cross or His crossbar most of the way to the crucifixion site until He finally fell to the ground. The Romans “enlisted” Simeon of Cyrene to take it the rest of the way.
- e. **The Crucifixion**—We may not know the specific horrors of what Jesus felt, but we can take our knowledge of crucifixion in general and apply it to Jesus' torture.
 - i. **Nails**: Romans used ropes and nails to attach their victims to the cross. The nails were actually spikes 5 to 7 inches long.³ The Romans drove the nails through the wrist near the pulse where the radius and the ulna come together. Then they nailed the feet, making sure they kept the victim's legs bent. (Otherwise, he would be unable to stretch to breath, and he would die too quickly. The Romans liked their victims to die slowly.)⁴ The nails probably shattered the nerves in Jesus' hands and feet—giving Him the same feeling you get when you hit your funny bone. This pain was so unbearable that they invented a new word: excruciating, which means, “out of the cross.”⁵
 - ii. **Setting the Cross**: Once the Romans nailed the victim to the cross, they lifted the cross up and dropped it into a hole in the ground. The force of the drop often dislocated the victim's shoulders and other bones. We know that Jesus bones were not broken, but they could have been dislocated—especially in light of Psalm 22:14 (I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint.)⁶
 - iii. **Death**: Victims of crucifixion died in many ways:
 - 1. **Asphyxiation**: People often died of asphyxiation on a cross. Basically, the angle the body hung on the cross made it difficult to breathe. Breathing in was fine, but breathing out was a chore. In order to exhale, the victim had to force himself up with his legs (against the nails in his feet—ouch!). If the victim fainted or slept, he would die. Finally, the victim succumbed to exhaustion and drowned in the water vapor he couldn't exhale.⁷
 - 2. **Exhaustion**: Those who hung on a cross for days often died of a combination of hunger, thirst, pain, fever, and exhaustion.⁸
 - 3. **Congestive Heart Failure**: The inability to breathe caused a series of chemical reactions in the blood that led to an irregular

heartbeat and finally a heart attack. (A victim probably welcomed a heart attack to avoid enduring the days of suffering the crucifixion normally entailed.)⁹

- f. Now that we understand how Jesus died, let's look at the two theories that say He didn't.
 - i. Conspiracy Theory
 - ii. Swoon Theory

IV. Conspiracy Theory

- a. **Quote:** "A... attempt to explain the historical data surrounding Jesus death and the birth of the church is the conspiracy theory. According to this theory, there were no appearances of the risen Jesus at all, whether hallucinatory or not; the disciples made it all up. This theory explains away the resurrection appearances as a fiction, and so again neatly solves the historical problem."¹⁰
 - i. This is the last defense theory. Usually, when someone has lost an argument or debate, he or she will simply deny the evidence that supports the opposite argument.
- b. The philosophy behind the Conspiracy Theory aligns with this same action. They have no evidence that explains away His death; therefore they deny that it happened at all—regardless of proof.
 - i. **Scripture:** Matthew 27:50-54
 - ⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.
 - ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. ⁵²The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.
 - ⁵³They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.
 - ⁵⁴When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!" NIV
- c. The Bible's four descriptions (one of them an eyewitness description) give us enough evidence that Jesus died on the cross.
- d. The lives of the disciples and eyewitnesses support this evidence as well. The disciples gave their lives for their claim that Jesus died & rose from the dead.¹¹
 - i. Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia.
 - ii. Mark was dragged by horses through the streets of Alexandria, Egypt until he was dead.

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- iii. Luke was hanged in Greece as a result of his tremendous preaching to the lost.
 - iv. John was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome, but miraculously survived. The Romans then sentenced John to the mines on the prison island of Patmos—where he wrote his prophetic Book of Revelation. The Romans later freed John, and he served as Bishop of Edessa in modern Turkey. He died as an old man—the only apostle to die in peace.
 - v. According to church tradition, Peter was crucified upside down on an x-shaped cross because he told his tormentors that he felt unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus had died.
 - vi. James the Just, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown over the southeast pinnacle of the Temple—and over a one hundred foot drop—when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. He survived the fall so James' enemies beat him to death with a fuller's club.
 - vii. James the Greater, a son of Zebedee, was beheaded at Jerusalem. The Roman officer who guarded James watched amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, the officer walked beside James to the place of execution, declared his new faith to the judge and knelt beside James to accept beheading as a Christian.
 - viii. Bartholomew, also know as Nathanael, was a missionary to present day Turkey. Bartholomew was flayed to death by a whip in Armenia.
 - ix. Andrew was crucified on an x-shaped cross in Patras, Greece. First, seven soldiers whipped him severely. Then they tied his body to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers reported that, when he was led toward the cross, Andrew saluted it in these words: "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He continued to preach to his tormentors for two days until he finally died.
 - x. Someone stabbed Thomas with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to establish the church in the subcontinent.
 - xi. Jude, the brother of Jesus, was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.
 - xii. Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and then beheaded.
- e. **Transition:** The disciples gave their lives for what many believe is a lie. Many critics who understand the idiocy of the Conspiracy Theory choose to deny Christ death by supporting the Swoon Theory.

V. The Swoon Theory: Jesus only Fainted

a. Illustration: That's a Gas!

At Heathrow Airport in England, a 300-foot red carpet was stretched out to Air Force One and President Bush strode to a warm but dignified handshake from Queen Elizabeth II.

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They rode in a silver 1934 Bentley to the edge of central London where they boarded an open 17th century coach hitched to six magnificent white horses. As they rode toward Buckingham Palace, each waved to the thousands of cheering Britons lining the streets. This was indeed a glorious display of pageantry and dignity.

Suddenly the right rear horse let rip the most horrendous, earth-shattering, eye-smarting blast of flatulence and the coach immediately filled with noxious fumes.

Uncomfortable, but maintaining control, the two dignitaries did their best to ignore the whole incident, until the Queen turned to Mr. Bush and explained, "Mr. President, please accept my regrets. I'm sure you understand that there are some things even a Queen cannot control."

George W., ever the Texas gentleman, replied, "Your Majesty, please don't give the matter another thought. You know, if you hadn't said something I would have assumed it was one of the horses."

- i. This theory definitely stinks. Especially when it comes to the facts and evidence of the theory.
- b. **Quote:** "One attempt to explain this data, sometimes called 'the swoon theory,' denies Jesus' death. On this theory, Jesus didn't really die at all. Yes, He was crucified—that much is undeniable—but He survived the crucifixion. When He was laid in the tomb He was unconscious, but alive. He then resuscitated, escaped from the tomb, and appeared to the disciples, who mistakenly thought He had been resurrected. This theory thus neatly explains the resurrection appearances without having, implausibly, to deny the crucifixion."¹²
- c. So the critics say Jesus swooned. Let's talk about why they're wrong.
- i. First, and most obvious, if Jesus fainted, He would have died...! No one can faint during a crucifixion and live.
 - ii. The Romans did not throw Jesus in a common grave. Joseph of Arimathea buried Him the Jewish way.
 1. **Scripture:** Mark 15:43-45

⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. NIV

 - a. From what we can learn in John 19:38-42, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body with 100 pounds of spices and wrapped Him in strips of linen.

Various women from Galilee, including Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, probably witnessed it. (See also Luke 23:50-56; cf. Matt. 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47).¹³

- b. If Jesus had not died but only swooned, they would have realized that He was still alive when they prepared Him for burial, and they would not have buried Him unless they were convinced He was dead.¹⁴
- iii. Rome charged its soldiers with making sure the crucifixion victim was dead before taking Him off the cross, and the Roman guards excelled at determining death. The centurion who certified that Jesus was dead would have lost his own life if he erred.¹⁵
- iv. Even if Jesus had survived the crucifixion, and awoke three days later—even after suffering from all His injuries and lacking food and water. How could He remove the grave clothes and leave the tomb? He could not dig out, since the tomb was stone. How could He roll away the rock (too large for the women to move—Mark 16:3), evade or overpower the guards, and still appear strong and healthy to convince the skeptical disciples that He had been resurrected?¹⁶
- v. Even if Jesus miraculously survived the crucifixion and somehow escaped from the tomb, no one would have mistaken Him for resurrected. The rigors of crucifixion would have left Him in an appalling state. When Jesus appeared to His disciples they described His body as glorified and resurrection.
- d. No one familiar with crucifixion can seriously believe the swoon theory.¹⁷
- e. Not only do we have unmistakable external evidence that supports the crucifixion, we also have the most reputable source, the account of His death in Scripture
 - i. **Scripture:** Matthew 28:3
³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.
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VI. Closing:

a. Lesson Recap:

- i. Jesus died on the cross. Historians can't find any evidence that supports otherwise.

b. Life Lessons:

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30

- i. **Illustration:** Clip from the “Passion of the Christ”
 Show the video clip from the Passion of the Christ, starting with the scene where the Roman soldiers nail Him to the cross. End just after they lift up the cross and drop it into the ground.

1. If Jesus never died, He would not have risen.
2. Without the resurrection we would have no Savior.
3. Without the Savior we would have no Salvation.

VII. Action Steps:

- a. Jesus endured the torture of the cross for you—because He loves you. Will you choose to follow Him?

¹ Dawson McAllister, *A Walk with Christ to the Cross* (Irving: Shepherd Ministries, 1980) 194

² Lee Strobel, *The Case for Easter* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 15

³ Strobel, 18

⁴ McAllister, 214

⁵ Strobel, 18-19

⁶ McAllister, 215

⁷ Strobel, 20

⁸ McAllister, 218

⁹ Strobel, 20

¹⁰ <http://www.existence-of-god.com/resurrection-evidence.html>

¹¹ <http://www.direct.ca/trinity/disciples.htm>

¹² <http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t012.html>

¹³ <http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t012.html>

¹⁴ <http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t012.html>

¹⁵ <http://christiananswers.net/q-eden/edn-t012.html>

¹⁶ http://www.biblestudylessons.com/cgi-bin/gospel_way/resurrection_evidence.php

¹⁷ <http://www.existence-of-god.com/resurrection-evidence.html>