

Exploring the Evidence for Christ

I Corinthians 15:12-19

October 1, 2017

Last week we began a four-week series called the “Case for Christ”, based on a movie of that same title. It is the story of the spiritual journey of Lee Strobel, an award winning journalist who went from being an ardent atheist, dead set on disproving Christianity to becoming a confident follower of Christ.

In the movie, Strobel set out to debunk Christianity by focusing on the question of whether or not Jesus rose from the dead. He recognized that this issue is, as some call 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. (Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

The Apostle Paul knew this to be true also. In I Corinthians 15:17 He writes, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; 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 Christ followers, are hopelessly lost and as Paul put it in verse 19, “of all people must be pitied.”

So this is where the rubber meets the road. This is really big deal.

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 have committed their whole lives to studying and understanding these issues. We obviously can’t cover everything there is to cover in the short time we have, but the good news is we can boil down the issue of Jesus’ resurrection to three simple questions:

1. Was Jesus alive at point A?
2. Was Jesus dead at Point B?
3. 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. Let’s investigate 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 claims that Jesus never lived at all. But 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.”

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. So let’s move on to our second point.

Jesus was dead at point B. For the resurrection to be true, Jesus had to really die. The Bible and history tells us he was executed by crucifixion and 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. 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 biographies of Jesus in the New Testament- each written with the life times of his contemporaries, but we also have five ancient sources outside the Bible.

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

As for the question of whether Jesus could have lived through his suffering on the cross, the evidence shows there is no way Jesus survived the efficient brutality of Roman execution.

In the “Case for Christ” movie, Lee Strobel pursues Dr. Alexander Metherell in order to investigate this very subject. Let’s watch this clip from the movie as Strobel explores the evidence for the crucifixion. (video 2: Exploring the Evidence for Christ – found on church website)

Did you hear what Strobel read from the Journal of the American Medical Association in this scene? “Clearly the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted. The evidence is clear; Jesus died on the cross.

Now for the most astounding claim; Jesus was alive at point C. There are two strands of evidence that establish that Jesus came back to life – his tomb was empty and that he appeared to people.

Jesus’ body was laid in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was sealed and Matthew’s Gospel says it was guarded – yet it was discovered empty on that first Easter morning.

How do we know it was empty? We know, because Jesus’ body was missing. If 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. Jesus’ body was not to be found.

One common story was that Jesus’ disciples came and somehow stole the body of Jesus. History records that most of the disciples were martyred proclaiming that Jesus had risen. Why would they have done that if they knew it was a lie? They wouldn’t have.

Of course the empty tomb alone isn’t enough to establish that Jesus was alive again. Thankfully we also have numerous accounts of the risen Jesus appearing to a variety of people in a variety of settings.

Sam read to us from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, that Jesus appeared to Peter, and then the twelve, and then to more than 500 people, many of whom were still alive at the time. Then he appeared to Paul himself on the road to Damascus. All four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John confirm that the disciples encountered the risen Jesus. The early church fathers Clement and Polycarp wrote of the resurrected Christ.

The evidence of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is overwhelming. 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 prove 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.

But why? Why did he do it? In the movie, Lee Strobel was looking at a picture of Jesus, with a priest, and he asked the priest that very question, “Why did Jesus side on the cross?” The priest answered, “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 have encountered that love and forgiveness with God. The evidence is clear, accept it for yourself.