

## Believe This!

It's been about one month since we observed "Easter", which I think more correctly should be called "Resurrection Sunday", and on the Friday before Easter we observed "Good Friday", the day on which we remember the crucifixion of Jesus. I would like to go back and consider some things about those events that we may have overlooked, and some things people have questioned.

The Roman crucifixion process took much of the day, and was preceded by a day of inquisition and torture. Some of those who were crucified did not die the first day, but lived for two or three days, and when people were tied to the cross instead of being nailed to it, they sometimes lived until they starved to death. The dead bodies of the crucified were sometimes left hanging on their crosses for days, as a political statement.

The torture that preceded the actual crucifixion was brutal. Scourging had become part of the process of executing those who had been condemned to death. The whip used in scourging had strips of leather with pieces of bone and metal tied into those leather strips. The result was that scourging tore the skin and flesh down to the bone. Some of the condemned were scourged to death.

Crucifixion was the form of execution used for slaves and the worst kinds of criminals. It was the most shameful, humiliating and disgraceful way to be killed.

Consider the fact that this was done to Jesus, and how it tells us what the Jewish people, their governing religious authorities and the recognized, secular, political government of their world believed about who Jesus was, and what He represented. Jesus was a threat to their way of life, their culture and their beliefs. Jesus had to be destroyed!

Satan was behind their rage at Jesus, and behind Pilate's inability to exercise his authority and pass judgment based on obvious reality rather than on political expediency, but it was God who had planned this from eternity.

It was not the will of the people. It was not the will of the governing, religious authorities. It was not the will of Pilate, representing secular, world government. It was not the will of Satan. It was not even Jesus' will at the time of His struggle with recognizing what was to come, until He submitted Himself to the will of the Father. It was the will of God the Father.

Unknown to all but Jesus, Jehovah God was in complete control of everything that was taking place. We know this from Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Then He said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, He fell with His face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Then He returned to His disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” He asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

When He came back, He again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Matthew 26: 38-44)

In this prayer, we see that Jesus was aware of what the Father’s will was for Him. Jesus also knew what He would suffer, not just death by crucifixion, but complete abandonment by His Father, Jehovah God. He knew that He was going to suffer the eternal punishment for the sins of all of mankind. At least in His human nature, He did not want to go through with this. In His divine nature, He knew the overwhelming suffering He would have to accept as He bore God’s wrath against all of the sins of all of mankind. The suffering inflicted by the whips of the Roman soldiers, and by crucifixion would be only a very small part of what He would bear.

The events recorded by Matthew in chapters 26 & 27 of his gospel teach us an important lesson about prayer, as well as reporting the events leading up to and following the crucifixion. We see Jesus, God’s Son, the second person of the Trinity, struggling with His Father, pleading with His Father. He knows what He is supposed to do, but He asks to be allowed to be excused, to not have to do it. Jesus makes a request of God and pleads that His request be granted. Then He goes away, knowing that His request has been denied. He submits to God’s will. In His prayer, He follows His heart wrenching request with a second request, “Not as I will, but as you will”.

When we see that, even a sincere, prayerful request by Jesus, God’s Son, can receive a “No” from God, then we may be able to understand that God will tell us, “No”, at times too. God has His will. We must accept what is God’s will for us, just as Jesus accepted His Father’s will for Himself.

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, the others there were reacting to His crucifixion in a variety of ways. People still do that today.

We see women friends watching sorrowfully, and weeping while others shouted insults.

We see other on-lookers, including chief priests and teachers of the law, mocking Jesus with questions like, “Why can’t he come down off that cross, if he is who he says he is, God’s Son?” And, still others commented mockingly, “He saved others, let him save himself.” Meanwhile the soldiers, apparently taking advantage of the situation, divided up the now naked Jesus’ clothes, but decide to gamble for the best piece.

The other two men being crucified at the same time, both convicted criminals, managed to get enough breath to state their response to who Jesus is. One man hurled insults at Jesus. The other man however, indicated his belief in God, confessed his guilt, recognized Jesus’ innocence and asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom. That means that he confessed that Jesus was not going to stay dead. Somehow he knew that Jesus was going to reign over His kingdom after the crucifixion was over.

Different reactions to Jesus. Different understandings of who Jesus is. Different understandings of His crucifixion. It was that way then. It is that way now. Where do you stand?

On the Internet, I found an article that came from the Humanist Website. The article begins: “Billions of Christians believe *Christ was crucified, buried, and then rose again*. This is the basis for *Christian faith*.”

But then, it quickly adds: What if *Jesus* survived the crucifixion?

The writer tries to support the idea that Jesus survived, and did not actually die on the cross by noting that crucifixion caused a slow death, sometimes taking as much as three days or longer. He then refers to the gospel accounts: “Jesus supposedly died within two to three hours.” He uses this to claim that Jesus actually had not died.

The writer's second argument ignores or strangely misinterprets what all four gospel writers record. This is his second argument:

The second oddity is that the crucifixion took place in what seemed to be a private garden and tomb owned by Joseph of Arimethea. The importance of this observation is that if there was any fraudulence associated with the crucifixion, then the public could be kept away in a private garden and *Jesus* could be privately taken away, revived, tendered and ministered to.

But the gospel record is very clear on that point. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each have written that Jesus was taken to Golgotha, The Place of the Skull. Jesus was taken there by a group of soldiers, and “a large number of people followed Him” (Luke 23: 27) The gospel writers record that, during the time that Jesus was on the cross, women were there, soldiers were there, and a variety of on-lookers came by and mocked Jesus. In addition, John identifies four women (Jesus' mother, two other women named Mary, and Jesus' mother's sister) as being there, in addition to himself.

Further, in John 19: 19-21, we can read:

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.”

The reason Pilate had his notice written in three languages was that he knew that of the many people who would see Jesus being crucified, they would not all read the same language. In addition, Aramaic was the Jew's language, Latin was the official government language, and Greek was the intellectual language.

The crucifixion was not carried out in a private place. It was done in a very public place, with lots of witnesses.

Because Jesus was crucified on a Friday, the process had to be finished by sundown. The Sabbath began at sundown, and this would be a special Sabbath, because the Passover was being celebrated. Regarding the place of Jesus burial, it was not the place of the crucifixion, but was near enough that Jesus could be buried before sundown, the beginning of the Sabbath. The disciple John records this:

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 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. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. 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. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

(John 19: 38-42)

Also, Mark recorded, in his gospel:

It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph 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. Pilate was surprised to hear that He was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where He was laid.

(Mark 15: 42-47)

A centurion, summoned by Pilate, would not have reported that Jesus was dead, if it were not true. He would have made sure that Jesus was dead before giving his report. You can imagine what would have been done to him, if he had lied. Also, the burial activities that were performed by Joseph and Nicodemus would not have been done with a living body. And then, we have the fear of the chief priests and the Pharisees. They knew Jesus was dead, and they were afraid the disciples would fake a resurrection.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ 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.”

“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.  
(Matthew 27: 62-66)

A Roman guard would not have been assigned to guard an empty tomb, or a tomb holding a living person who was hiding because he had been ordered to be crucified.

As far as the disciples trying to fake a resurrection, they were all scared and stunned. They had forgotten, or not understood, Jesus' statements about rising on the third day. They didn't know what to believe even after being told about the empty tomb and the angels. Luke tells us about two men being met by Jesus on the road. They didn't recognize Jesus until He broke bread and gave thanks for it.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing Him.

He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked Him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” He asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and

deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified Him; but we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find His body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said He was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus. ...

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if He were going farther. But they urged Him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So He went in to stay with them.

When He was at the table with them, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, and He disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when He broke the bread.

(Luke 24: 13-24 & 28-35)

From all this, we can see that Jesus was dead when He was taken off the cross. Nobody robbed the grave to fake a resurrection. Jesus certainly had come back to life. Jesus had died and was raised to life by the power of the Father.

Because Islam has an increasing presence in our society these days, I decided to look up information about Islam's understanding of the resurrection. On the Internet, I found an article by Dr. Christine Schirmacher. This is part of what she wrote:

It is commonly known, that the question whether Jesus was crucified and what significance the crucifixion has, belongs to the major points of discussion between Islam and Christianity. Whereas for Christianity a rejection of the crucifixion and salvation touches the centre of the Christian faith, in the Qur'ân the event plays only a minor role.

Muslim theology nevertheless has made extensive comments on the crucifixion.

The Qur'ân deals with the crucifixion of Jesus only in a single verse. Because of its ambiguousness this verse is the starting-point of all discussion about the crucifixion.

Sura 4,157-158 (a passage from the Qur'ân) reads: "... and they (the Jews) have said, 'Verily we have slain Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of God'. But they slew him not, neither crucified him, but it seemed to them as if (or: he seemed to them to be crucified). They did not kill him with certainty. No, God took him up unto himself".

It is interesting to note that the Qur'ân does not even mention or hint at the *meaning* of the crucifixion of Jesus as the salvation of His people.

Dr. Schirmacher notes that the true Muslim understanding of the crucifixion is difficult to know, because of disagreements in interpretations of the translation of the Qur'ân.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that a deep darkness covered the land for three hours during the crucifixion. Some, who deny the resurrection of Jesus, claim that Jesus was secretly taken off the cross while it was too dark to see what was being done. This, of course, is ridiculous to suggest. We have this report of what took place after it was light again:

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

(John 19: 31-34)

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are central to Christianity. The Apostle Paul was very clear about this when he wrote:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

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But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.  
(I Corinthians 15: 12-22)

There are many who refuse to accept the truth of Jesus having given His life, a sacrifice on a cross, to pay the full penalty for all sin, everyone's, even those who refuse to accept what He has done. And there are many who refuse to believe that the Father raised Jesus from death. The Apostle Paul wrote about that, and assures us that, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Before He raised Lazarus from death, Jesus had this discussion with Martha:

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"  
(John 11: 21-26)

Jesus also has said:

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3: 16)

**"Do you believe this?"**

**Whoever believes shall not perish but will have eternal life.**

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