

Six Reasons Christianity Failed

The Passion of Christ – Part III

Matthew 27-28

Introduction

Today we will conclude our study of what we have entitled “The Passion of Christ”. We have gone to the Garden of Gethsemane and seen the agony of Jesus Christ and observed all that was involved in that hour. We then went to the cross and saw what was involved in Calvary; in fact, could really only skim the surface. Now we come to the point where Jesus is going to be buried.

Note that people are not slapping each other on the back. The disciples are not shouting, “Glory hallelujah! This is exactly what we planned. He had to die, He had to be buried, and we know He is going to rise again from the dead.”

Instead, they are mortified; they are stunned; they are silent. In fact, the disciples are in hiding because they believe that Christianity, before it ever got started, is finished.

Let me take you to a passage of scripture that will let us know why these followers felt that Jesus was dead forever and Christianity was finished forever.

From a Human Perspective – Six Reasons Christianity Failed

Turn in your Bible to Matthew chapter 27 and let us look, from a human perspective, at six reasons Christianity had failed.

1. Christ was put to death by crucifixion.

Matthew 27:57-58 lets us know that Jesus was, in fact, dead. Look at these verses.

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

Understand that there was a reason that Joseph did this. He was a follower of Jesus and loved Him, although secretly. Joseph knew that all criminals, in that day, were burned in the Valley of Hinnom. The

bodies would be taken down from the cross and burned in this valley where there was a perpetual flame. They were not given proper burials, since they were outcasts. They were either political or religious criminals, so they would be burned. Their ashes would simply stay in this valley that was also known as the Valley of Corpses. Because Joseph did not want this to occur, and Jesus’ disciples did not come forward to claim the body, Joseph came forward at the last moment and begged that the body be given to him so that he could give Him a proper burial.

2. Christ’s body was prepared for burial.

In Matthew 27:59, we are told that Joseph was prepared, as we read,

And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,

When we go back in the history of this culture, we discover that the practice of the Jews for burial was rather common. They would take the body – in this case, the body of Jesus from the cross – and take it to the tomb, where they would bury it. There would be, inside the tomb, a small table on which they would lay the body on its back. They would wash the body with warm water, according to the ritualistic views of the Jews. Then, as part of the preparation, they would adorn the body with spices.

We are told in John 19:39 that about a hundred pounds of spices were used for Jesus’ body, which seems like a lot. However, Josephus, a Jewish historian during this time, tells us that when Herod was buried, it took 500 servants to carry all of the spices. So a hundred pounds was not that unusual.

The Jews would also use linens for the body – usually at least three pieces. We know from the gospel accounts that there were at least two used for Jesus – one for the body and one for the head (John 20:7). They would wrap the body and in each fold, they would put the gummy substance known as myrrh – an expensive, aromatic spice. The myrrh would harden over time and create almost a mummy or a cocoon – a hard shell. This is significant as we get into this story.

3. Christ's body was placed in a rock tomb.

Christ's body was then placed in a rock tomb. We are told in Matthew 27:60a that Joseph,

. . . laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock . . .

You may have heard that this was a borrowed tomb. I believe this tomb was permanent. I think Joseph gave Jesus his own tomb and, when he sealed it, he walked away never expecting to use this tomb for himself. I believe Joseph felt, as did all the others, that something tragic had happened and in some way, something had gone wrong. He thought Jesus was now dead and buried and would stay that way forever, so he gave Him his own tomb.

Continue to Matthew 27:60b, where we read that Joseph,

. . . rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.

There were several kinds of tombs, in Jesus' day. One was called "thearcosolia," which was the kind of tomb that was hewn out of solid rock and was a cave. The entrance to this tomb would be about five and a half to six feet high. Inside the tomb, there would be a trough built around the edge, where they could lay the body at any point they wanted. In the center, the tomb was high enough for someone to stand upright and prepare the body. It seems that this is the kind of tomb in which Jesus was laid because it had a rock that they would roll in front.

Outside the tomb, in order to get the massive rock to cover the tomb, a gully or gutter would be dug. The rock would be rolled downhill in this gutter, with the help of gravity, to rest in front of the tomb, and a stone wedge would be placed under it. To remove the stone, it would have to be rolled uphill. A manuscript extant has been discovered that tells that twenty men could not move this stone. The gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea moved the stone in front of the tomb – evidently with the help of gravity. But it would take more than twenty men to ever move the stone away again, which is an indication that something miraculous will happen.

4. A Roman guard was posted at Christ's tomb.

Notice, in the text, that a Roman guard is then stationed. Look at Matthew 27:62-65.

Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,

and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'

"Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."

Pilate said to them, "You have a guard, go, make it as secure as you know how."

Now, if you have observed the pictures in the Sunday school materials, you have seen these Roman soldiers. They do not look frightening at all to me. They are standing there holding little spears and wearing mini-skirts, and they look rather innocent. However, these men were literally the fighting machine of the Roman army. The empire was guarded by these men who were trained in hand-to-hand combat. In fact, historians tell us that each soldier was trained to guard six square feet of property or real estate; six square feet of ground.

Now, the guard, in this passage, indicates that there were at least sixteen men heavily armed with coats of mail, with spears, with swords. They were brawny men trained to defend against and attack anyone who came within six feet of them.

The Pharisees did not want anyone near this tomb, so they posted a guard.

5. Christ's tomb was sealed.

Not only did the Pharisees post a guard, but the gospel accounts tell us that they set a seal. Look at Matthew 27:66.

And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

To set a seal, they took a long piece of twine or rope and stretched it from one side of the stone all the way across to the other side of the stone. Then, they took sealing wax and pressed the rope into place so that it draped across the front of the rock. Then, on either side into the wax, a ring would be pressed, declaring that the Roman authorities said, "This is to remain as it is."

They had the custom in that day, in fact, that if anyone ever broke a seal, they would be crucified upside-down. So, obviously, people were not going to mess with something that declared that the authorities of Rome were saying, "This stays just like it is."

I find it fascinating that the authority of the land; the greatest power of the known world told people, “This grave is sealed – it will never be opened. It is finished.”

The Pharisees are soon going to kick themselves for ever assigning a guard, as we will see in a minute.

6. The disciples of Christ were in hiding.

There is one other thing that the gospel accounts tell us that lets us know that Christianity, before it ever started, was over, from a human perspective, and that is, ten of the disciples were in hiding.

One of the disciples had committed suicide. Another one had left and no one knew where he was. He was the one that we refer to as Thomas, the doubter.

The other ten disciples were in hiding in an upper room, perhaps in John’s home. There they sat, in awkward silence, perhaps even afraid to look at each other because they knew they had all denied Him and had all fled, and after giving three years of their lives to this man who said He would set up a kingdom – now what?!

I imagine in this room, there was a hushed, tense silence as they must have thought Christianity was a dream and perhaps they had been duped into believing in the kingdom. So there these disciples sat.

The next seventy-two hours would probably seem like an eternity to the disciples. They did not know when it would end; they did not know what would happen.

From a Divine Perspective – Six Reasons Christianity Flourished

I love the historical account of Lord Wellington, who commanded the fleet of England and took on Napoleon. History records for us that Wellington and Napoleon engaged in battle and the news of this battle reached England by way of flashes of light, sort of like a Morse code. On the shores, following the battle, a fog had begun to set in. The only thing that could be seen from the light was the words, “Wellington defeated.” England was thrown into a panic – until the fog began to clear and they saw the rest of the message, “Wellington defeated Napoleon.”

The fog is about to clear and we are going to take a seventy-two hour leap into the future of this account. However, first notice some things that have happened.

Turn to Matthew chapter 28 and let us look, from a divine perspective, at six reasons Christianity had flourished.

1. The Roman power was broken.

Look at Matthew 28:1-2.

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.

The first thing that occurs in this story is, obviously, the Roman seal that was supposedly there to tell people to stay away, was broken. The implication is that there is a greater power than Rome at work. There is Someone willing to take on this great nation whose hand is now becoming evident.

2. The stone was removed.

The second thing that occurs in this story is that the stone was rolled away.

The gospel accounts are interesting. In fact, the words in the Greek language help a lot because by placing a simple suffix before a verb, we are given a great deal of explanation. Our English language is so inadequate in comparison. It is interesting that three gospel accounts give us three different suffixes for the stone being rolled away.

The suffix causes Mark 16:4 to say, “rolled uphill”. In other words, in some way, this stone rolled away against the force of gravity. There must have been at least twenty men involved because somehow this stone was rolled uphill in its groove.

Yet, in another gospel account, in Luke 24:2, we are told that the stone was rolled “away from” the tomb. In other words, the stone was out of the groove or gully. So someone had not only rolled it up, but away from the tomb.

Then, we read the gospel of John, and in John 20:1, the suffix means the stone was picked up and carried away from the tomb.

Somehow, the way this stone lay was an undeniable mark to the soldiers, who began trembling in fear, and to all the people who would come and observe. They would come to the tomb and look in and see that it was empty. Then, they would look for the stone and see that it was not in the gully, but had

been tossed away from the tomb like a crumpled up piece of paper. Who was at work?

I heard one time, and it struck me, and perhaps you have also heard, this stone was not removed to let Jesus Christ out, but to let people in to see that the tomb was empty.

3. The Roman guard fled and were bribed.

Look at Matthew 28:11.

Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.

I would have loved to have been there to hear this.

“What happened?”

“Well, an angel came – two of them – and they picked that stone up and threw it away.”

We are told in Matthew 28:4 that,

The guards shook for fear . . . and became like dead men.

In other words, the guards fainted. Finally, when they revived, the guards rushed back and told the religious leaders, “Listen, here’s exactly what happened – angels came down in fiery light and picked that stone up and threw it to the side and one of them is sitting on it now.”

Continue to Matthew 28:12a.

And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they . . .

. . . had a revival.”

This is the way it should read. These men should have gotten together and recognized all that had happened. There were the eyewitness accounts of the Roman legion – and these soldiers knew that if they deserted their posts or were sleeping on the job, they would be killed.

These soldiers came, deserting their posts and declaring what had happened, and these leaders thought, “Oh, why did we ever post a guard? We should have left the stone to the side. We should have made it easy for the disciples to steal the body. Why did we post a guard? Who came up with that ridiculous idea?!”

However, instead of believing, notice what these religious leaders do in Matthew 28:12b.

. . . they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,

This was probably enough money for these soldiers to retire.

Continue to Matthew 28:13 and notice what the leaders say.

and said, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’”

While they were asleep?! This would place the lives of the soldiers in jeopardy. If word got back that they were sleeping at their posts, they would die.

However, notice Matthew 28:14.

And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.

In other words, “We know, by saying you were sleeping, that you will be in trouble, but we’ll make sure that you don’t get in trouble. And we’ll give you enough money because you will probably be the laughing stock of the Roman Empire because you were sleeping – all sixteen of you were taking a nap. We’ll give you enough money to retire.”

Let us look at another thing that was interesting.

4. The grave clothes were undisturbed.

John chapter 20 tells us that the grave clothes were undisturbed. Look at John 20:6.

And Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there,

The linen wrappings were literally lying in their folds.

Picture this incredible sight. These men stoop down and look inside the tomb, and there along the circumference of the tomb, they see the clothes in their folds. They see the silhouette of a body in the clothes – there is the bump of a nose, the depression of a neck, the rise of the chest, and there are the feet – but there is nothing in it.

Not only this, but it says, in John 20:7,

and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Seeing just this was proof enough. There was nothing but a cocoon; a shell. Somehow Jesus Christ, in His glorified body, just evaporated through it, leaving the shape of His body. And He took the time to pick up the linen napkin that had covered His face

and roll it up and set it neatly aside. He would then evaporate through the walls of the tomb.

Jesus would later evaporate through the walls of the upper room where the disciples were with the door locked. He stood there and asked, "May I have a piece of fish?" He joined them for a bite to eat.

5. Women were the first witnesses.

It helps to know more about the culture to understand why this was so unusual.

Look at John 20:1.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb.

Note what Mary Magdalene then did, in John 20:2.

So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

Continue to John 20:3.

So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb.

The interesting thing is that in this day, a woman was not allowed in a courtroom. Her testimony was invalid, for no other reason than that she was a woman.

It is interesting that God, when He raised His Son from the dead, would allow, as the first witness, a woman, and women. We would scratch our heads and think, "Now, if the disciples were going to fabricate this story; if they were going to make up a lie, they would certainly be smart enough to get someone other than people who were not even allowed testimony in court to declare it."

So another evidence of its truth is that Jesus allowed women to be the first to see and the first to declare that Jesus Christ is alive. Let us look one more piece of evidence.

6. Jesus Christ was seen by more than 500 people.

Jesus was seen by more than 500 people (I Corinthians 15:5-7) and yet, they all agree. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, writing at different times and in different locations, all agree in their stories.

Perhaps you have heard of the very smart teacher who had four boys skip her class. They came to school and she asked, "Where have you been? Why are you late?"

They replied, "We had a flat tire."

The teacher immediately separated the four boys and into four different rooms. Then, she went to each room and asked, "Which tire went flat?"

If four men are writing at different times and in different locations, at least one of them is going to slip up if they are writing a lie. Yet, they, along with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus; they, along with the 500-plus all agree that Jesus Christ was alive.

The Undeniable Results of the Resurrection

The events that followed the resurrection give continued proof of Christ's life. Let me give you a few things that reveal that Jesus Christ *must* have risen from the dead.

1. The church was created.

Turn to Acts chapter 2. Peter – a man who was too afraid to speak earlier – will give his first message. He says, in Acts 2:22-24,

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know –

this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.

Ladies and gentlemen, the very church of Jesus Christ is built upon the foundation of this doctrinal truth; that is, Jesus Christ literally, bodily, physically – however you want to say it – rose from the dead. If this had not occurred, the church of Jesus Christ would be without premise; without foundation.

This is the first word that Peter declares to these people. In other words, "By the way, Jesus whom you crucified; the same Jesus who was buried; He is now alive."

The interesting thing is that Peter is preaching in Jerusalem. All of these people can go trooping down

the trail and look into the garden tomb and say, "That's where Jesus was buried."

"Yes, that's right. I can see the wax on the side by the stone there. It's still there with the imprint. Jesus is gone. The tomb is empty."

One would say the religious leaders had stolen the body to help fabricate this lie.

All the religious leaders had to do was produce the body right about now – right when Peter is about to give the invitation. They could have said, "Oh, excuse us gentlemen, here's the body."

No one ever denied, even these men, that Jesus had risen from the dead. The religious leaders scrambled for a lie and the church was built on its truth.

2. Baptism is practiced.

This does not make any sense without the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Look at Romans 6:4, where Paul writes,

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

This is a strange custom, is it not? No, it is not – it is a declaration and an identification with Jesus Christ who was crucified and then buried in the tomb. The baptismal water represents the tomb. An individual, by baptism, follows this death identification with Christ and is buried, and then is raised again, as this verse says, in newness of life.

This act; this custom; this ordinance only makes sense if the church believes that Jesus Christ came up out of the grave. This ordinance was established to picture this resurrection.

3. Sunday worship is observed.

What else would cause Jews to turn their backs on centuries of tradition? To violate the Sabbath would mean disfavor and a curse from God. Yet, in Acts chapter 2, 3000-plus Jews began to worship on the "Lord's day," as they began to refer to it (John uses this in Revelation 1:10). By the time of Acts chapter 20, the disciples have set aside their worship for the Lord's day; that is Sunday.

The Sabbath day is continually becoming a thing of the past. How could that be after years of training and instruction? Obviously, as the scriptures tell us, they met to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ

that released them from the Mosaic ordinance of Sabbath worship.

Let us look at one more.

4. People's lives are changed.

For you and me, two thousand years beyond the tomb, this is a significant point.

Can you look in your life; can you look in your past and see where you received Christ as Savior and see a changed life? Yes, if Christ has been involved.

How did the lives of these people change? Let me give two ways.

- First, people's lives changed from unbelief to belief.

James, the half brother of Jesus Christ, was counted among the Pharisees. He had rejected his brother. And wouldn't you if your brother came along and said, "I'm bread from heaven. I'm the Light of the world."?

James thought his brother had "lost it". In fact, at one point, James and his brothers and sisters had come to take Jesus and put Him away to protect Him. "He's not thinking straight." (Mark 3:21, 31-35)

Yet, James will write his own epistle and will acknowledge God and His Son, of whom he is a servant (James 1:1). What in the world would happen to a brother who now acknowledges Jesus Christ as God?

I Corinthians 15:7 tells us that Jesus Christ made a personal appearance to James.

It was the resurrection of Christ that changed James from unbelief to belief.

Paul hated the church. What would bring about a change in his life? He was a man who pursued and hunted down believers. It was along the Damascus road that he saw the glory of God. He said, "Lord, who are You?" And that voice said, "I am Jesus." (Acts 9)

Paul changed from unbelief to belief.

Let us look at another way people's lives changed.

- Secondly, people's lives changed from cowardice to courage.

I do not think there is any more beautiful statement in all of scripture than when the angel tells the ladies, in Mark 16:6-7, "Take the message that Jesus Christ is alive to the disciples *and . . .*" – to who? – ". . . to Peter."

Peter had said he would follow Christ to the end and then, had put on a scene outside the courtroom and had denied Him. He had walked away.

If there was anyone who would never have been given a chance, had we been Jesus, it would have been Peter. Yet, the remark is made, “Go back and tell the disciples Jesus is alive, and make sure you tell Peter.”

There was something in Peter’s heart that was so turned that earlier when persecution came, he ran; he hesitated; he denied. Now, this same Peter will stand and declare the first message that Jesus Christ is alive. He is a man who will become a martyr. He will himself, according to history, be crucified upside-down.

What would take a coward and turn him into such a courageous man? Only one thing – he knew that Jesus Christ was alive.

Conclusion

Bob Ingersoll, a man who spent his life denying the existence of God, would stand before a crowd of people and take off his watch and say, “If there is a God, let Him strike me dead.”

Ingersoll would count down 60 seconds and would still be standing at the end. He would then say, “See, there is no God.”

This man who rejected Jesus Christ was a very influential man. He died a terrible death. At his memorial service in a stately downtown church, hundreds of people came. It is interesting that in the bulletin in the order of service, there was written on the front in large enough letters for everyone to read, “There will be no singing.”

Why not? To deny Jesus Christ takes away the opportunity and the privilege of coming to something like His death and His burial and leave with singing. There is something about acknowledging Jesus Christ as Savior and inviting Him into your life that gives you the ability to sing.

Let me say one thing in closing. Just as Jesus Christ came and fulfilled prophecy; just as He was crucified according to prophecy; just as He was buried according to the scriptures; just as He rose again according to the scriptures, there is one thing left – He is coming back. Are you ready?