

Did Jesus really live?

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Preacher: Brian Edwards

[0 : 0 0] Thank you. It's very kind of it. It's always best to get the applause at the beginning because then it's not embarrassing when there's none at the end. Well, you're the brave ones who have turned out on a pretty foul evening, but I believe they've been a bit short of rain up here in the north.

So we have actually down in the south as well. So it is welcome. And we thank God for rain. All the weather belongs to him. And we thank God that in our wonderful climate, we have a good mixture of both.

We have plenty of weather. That's why we're always talking about it. Well, now, those of you who haven't been here, the first session we were looking at evidence for the Bible based upon the subject of the large book at the back there, Evidence for the Bible, showing how archaeology demonstrates some of those many items of people and places that once were considered never to exist simply because they were only in the Bible and now no one disputes them because they are well known and well accepted across the world of archaeology and biblical scholarship.

And then last night we were looking at something different. And this night we're moving forward steadily each time, trying to move to that position where tomorrow night we're going to be looking at Christ in the Old Testament.

And we'll be focusing particularly upon the preparation of Christ in the Old Testament. Tonight, I want to look at the real Jesus with you. And that may seem a little bit unusual because most of you here this evening, I would imagine, are confident that you understand the real Jesus.

[1 : 3 7] He's revealed in the four gospel records particularly. You don't have any doubt about that and you're quite comfortable with that. But I want to poke at that a little bit to show you that that's not what everybody believes.

And so we're going to look at a number of things. First of all, was Jesus a real person of history? That'll be the first thing we'll be looking at. And then we'll ask the question, are the gospels, the four gospels, a reliable record?

And then we'll ask the question, did Jesus die on a cross? And don't assume the answer is necessarily, of course he did. And second, thirdly or fourthly, whatever it is, did Jesus die on the cross?

And you may be surprised who questions that. And then finally, did Jesus literally rise from the dead? Now, if you have already your ready-made answer to all of those questions, just stay with us.

Because it may be helpful in your defense of the gospel and explaining to other people to know where some people stand on this whole question. And have a few decisions up your, answers up your sleeve to answer them.

[2 : 4 3] And let me repeat what I said last night. Now, I'm putting a lot of material into this stuff and you won't remember a fraction of it. Don't worry about that. I wouldn't either.

Some people think that I've got a good memory. But my wife will tell you that by Monday I can't sometimes even remember what I preached on on Sunday morning. Which is not very hopeful for my congregations, is it?

I'm going to be, so don't worry, because it's the impression I want you to get and you can always find this material elsewhere and jot down anything that strikes you.

So let's start right in. Was Jesus a real person of history? I want to give you a summary right from the start and it's like this. There is not a single text in Jewish or pagan literature in the first few centuries that ever denies the historical reality of Jesus.

On the contrary, all references to Jesus in those first few centuries confirm his life and death and the accounts of his miracles and resurrections, though they may give a very different interpretation to it, as we will see.

[3 : 45] In spite of this, and this is why I'm even dealing with the subject, there are still those who are determined to portray Jesus revealed in the scriptures as little more than a mythical figure invented by early Christian tradition.

For an example of this, a book was published as recently as 2013 called *Is Not This the Carpenter?* Subtitled *The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*.

It was published in Durham in England in 2013 and it questions the reality of the existence of Jesus. This is an actual publication.

In the *God Delusion* that Richard Dawkins wrote, he wrote this, Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament, and obviously not the Old Testament as a reliable record of what happened in history.

That's the kind of thing we're up against and because Dawkins is, he's getting a little passé now, but he was and still is in many areas a very popular name, people believe what he says because they think he knows what he's talking about and therefore they simply accept it.

[5 : 04] I want to give you two rather straightforward responses to this kind of thing. One of them is more amusing than the second. Professor N.T. Wright was called by the BBC Today programme to ask if he would go on air on a Good Friday to debate with the authors of a new book.

The book was entitled *The Jesus Mysteries*. The early church knew it and it knew that it was propagating a new version of an old myth and that the developed church covered it up in the interest of its own power and control.

Wright responded politely to the BBC's request and suggested it was rather like asking a professional astronomer to debate with the authors of a book claiming the moon was made of green cheese.

I think that was a brilliant response. More seriously, John Piper writes, The denial that Christ was crucified is like the denial of the Holocaust. For some it's simply too horrific to affirm.

For others, it's an elaborate conspiracy to coerce religious sympathy. But the deniers live in a historical dream world. But there are many people who do.

[6 : 30] Now the evidence for the historical Jesus outside the Bible is well known and it's well documented. So I'm going to give you a bit of a brief survey of some of those outside of the Bible.

So for a moment you close up your Bible, you throw it away. What are we left with? Well, the first person I want to mention is Publius Cornelius Tacitus, the Roman senator and historian.

He was actually born while the apostles were still alive, so he's close to the scene of action. His major work was entitled Annals and included the biography of the Emperor Nero, who he disliked intensely.

And in AD 64, some of you will know your history, the centre of Rome was engulfed in a horrific fire for which Nero himself was blamed widely. He was trying to create a brownfield site to build his wonderful golden palace, which he did.

And to turn attention from himself, he harnessed the popular hatred of Christians, which resulted in terrible cruelty of large numbers of them. And Tacitus commented on this persecution and included in it the following.

[7 : 42] Therefore, he wrote, to put down the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits and punished in the most unusual ways those hated for their shameful acts, whom the crowd called Christians.

That's his word, Christians. The founder of this name, Christus, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate, suppressed for a time.

The deadly superstition erupted again, not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city, that's Rome, where all things horrible and shameful come together and become popular.

So those of you who believe the deadly superstition of Christus, that's what Tacitus was saying. Now, Tacitus is regarded as a careful and accurate writer and the most reliable of all the Roman historians.

No reputable scholar, if I may borrow an adjective that Dawkins likes, no reputable scholar doubts the accuracy of his assertion that Jesus Christ was executed during the time of the emperor Tiberius by Pontius Pilate.

[8 : 50] And then let's move on to somebody very different, Flavius Josephus. Josephus was born a Jew only four years after the crucifixion of Jesus. So again, he's contemporary.

This makes him a very credible witness to the history of the times. When Titus became emperor, Josephus lived under the protection of Rome.

I needn't go into the story of how he, as a Jew, came under the protection of Rome. His two great works, the Jewish War and the Jewish Antiquities, defended the value of Judaism.

But in his Jewish Antiquities, there are two clear references to Jesus. I'm only going to deal with the first. The first is his way of introducing James, who he claims was stoned to death on the orders of the high priest Ananus in AD 62.

And Josephus records that the high priest assembled the Sanhedrin of Judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, the Messiah, whose name was James and some others.

[9 : 58] And when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. Now notice carefully what he says. I've underlined it there for you. You see, James was a common Jewish name at this time, and Josephus felt it necessary to identify him.

The normal way of identifying him would be to name his father. However, Josephus must have recognized the significance of identifying James as the brother of Jesus, who is called Christ.

Jesus was also, believe it or not, a not uncommon name, so he identifies the brother as who is called Christ. There would be no mistaking which James and Jesus Josephus meant.

Josephus is not endorsing the title Christ. He's simply recording it. Some people thought he was the Messiah. Now, no historian anywhere doubts the genuineness of this text.

If anyone's thinking, but wait a minute, I thought they were, yes, I know what you're thinking about, but this is not the text. No historian anywhere doubts the genuineness of this text.

[11 : 07] And therefore, the reality of Jesus, who was called the Messiah, having a brother known as James, who was stoned to death under the high priest of Ananias is without question. There is another reference in Jewish antiquities.

That is disputed by some. I'm not bothering to give it to you, but the only reason it's disputed, because it's in every one of the manuscript, the extant copies of Josephus that we have, the only reason they dispute it is that it is actually too close a reference to Jesus.

It calls him a wise man, if it's right even to call him a man, he says. And some say Josephus would never have written that. That, again, is an assumption, because we have no evidence to the contrary.

But I'm not giving you that one. I shouldn't have even bothered to mention it. From the authority of Tacitus and Josephus, any unprejudiced historian will conclude that there was a Jesus, who had a brother named James, that he was known by some as the Christ, Messiah.

He was accused by the Jewish authorities, condemned to be crucified on the orders of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, during the reign of Tiberius, somewhere between AD 26 and 36, because that's when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and that his life and death gave rise to the new religion of Christians.

[12 : 24] All that is simply a matter of historical fact. But we can say a little bit more. Some of this I've alluded to, and as I did say last night, there is a bit of overlap in these talks, inevitably.

The Jewish Talmud is a collection of biblical discussions and wise sayings of the rabbis, created somewhere around the 4th century, though it's 3rd and 4th and 5th. Scattered fragments refer to Christ and confirm his historical existence.

This was never doubted. However, as you can imagine, the Talmud refers to Jesus not in the way we read in the Gospels. He is the illegitimate son of a soldier, a deceiver with evil teaching, who performed miracles by magic.

He was given a fair trial and put to death. His body was stolen by the disciples. Now you'll notice that one thing is certain there. There is no suggestion that Jesus was not a real person.

It's just that all the stories about him are false. But let's take some pagan writers. Celsus, a Roman philosopher, violently opposed to the Christian faith.

[13 : 34] Around the year AD 178, he published True Discourse as a vigorous argument against Christianity. He was, if you like, the Richard Dawking of the 2nd century.

Now this true discourse is now lost. So you say, well, how can you talk about him? Well, we can quite easily because the Christian leader, Origen of Alexandria, responded in detail to this book, in his own book, Contra Celsus, against Celsus.

And from this we know what Celsus wrote. In other words, he carefully itemized what Celsus was saying and then he gives his answer to them. So we actually know what Celsus was saying.

Significantly, Celsus never once argued against the true historicity of Jesus, but simply reinterpreted all the events of his life a bit like this. Celsus was accused Jesus of having invented his birth from a virgin and continues that he was, quote, born in a certain Jewish village of a poor woman of the country who gained her subsistence by spinning and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera.

After being driven away by her husband and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty and having there acquired some miraculous powers on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them and by means of these proclaimed himself a god.

[15 : 10] Now, Celsus maintained that the cures, the resurrections, the miracles were nothing more than tricks of jugglers and that he exhibited after his death only the appearance of wounds received on the cross and in reality was not so badly wounded as he is described to have been.

Now, isn't that interesting? The one thing he does not dispute is that Jesus was real and that he died on, well, he didn't really die on a cross, but he was at least crucified and he didn't actually die there, which, as we'll see shortly, others maintain to this day.

No one disputes as other than genuine the tirade against Christianity by Celsus that we read about in The True Discourse. Why did Celsus trouble to rubbish Christian belief in the life of Jesus if the easier response would simply be to demonstrate that he never lived in the first place?

And one more, Lucian of Samosata, or Samosata. He was a second century Greek satirist who ridiculed the Christians and Christ, interestingly again, but never disputed the historical reality.

He claimed that the miracles were tricks, that the resurrection was a hoax, because, again, Jesus wasn't really dead. This swoon theory on the cross is more popular than some of us may believe.

[16 : 37] The Christians you know worship a man to this day, he wrote, the distinguished person who introduced their novel rites and was crucified on that account. It was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they were all brothers from the moment they are converted and deny the gods of Greece the worship and worship the crucified sage and live after his laws.

As I said the other evening when I quoted that, I think that's a magnificent testimony to the Christians of the second century. So the conclusion is this. There is not a single text in Jewish or pagan literature in the first few centuries that ever denies the historical reality of Jesus.

And in addition, we should remember that the disciples of Christ each gave their lives for a belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And the earliest church leaders, like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Papias of Phrygia, they would have known some of the apostles, yet in all their writing they never doubted the historical Jesus.

The suggestion that Jesus never existed is a purely modern idea without a speck of evidence. Even those who were violently and vehemently against him in the first few centuries never questioned his existence.

It's the gasp of timid critics who are unable to confront the massive challenge of who Jesus is, what he claimed and all that he accomplished.

[18 : 03] I hope that will help to give you some idea of the kind of answers you can give to people who still try to claim that Jesus never existed.

That is just a non-starter. Secondly, are our four gospels a reliable record? Well, let me give you a summary of this. There only were ever four gospels accepted by the churches.

Now, if you've been or were avid readers of the Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, I won't ask you to put your hand up if you were, you will know that Dan Brown suggested there were at least 80 gospels and it was almost a lottery of which ones got in.

Well, that, of course, is sheer unadulterated nonsense, as he knew very well. But the point I'm making is that there were only ever four gospels accepted by the churches across the Roman Empire.

They were completed before the close of the first century and they bear all the marks, as we saw last night, of reliable eyewitnesses.

[19 : 08] The disciples, and again a little bit of repetition from before, the disciples were brought up with the recorded history of Israel throughout the Old Testament and it was only to be expected that they would have considered a written record of the life of Jesus and his teaching to be essential.

Writing, as we said, was well established in the first century. I don't need to go over that. We went through it in detail yesterday. Every boy taught to read the scriptures and notebooks were used by the students, by both rabbis and philosophers.

The earliest Christian writers accepted the letters of Paul and the gospels as scripture. Polycarp was one. Papias was another.

Papias was acquainted with those who knew the apostles personally and he makes reference to Matthew, quote, composing the sayings of the Lord in a Hebrew dialect. And he also commented on the gospel of Mark, John Mark, compiled under the influence of the apostle Peter.

And that goes right back to the time of Papias, who was born in 69, before all the apostles were dead. Justin Martyr became a teacher in the Church of Rome about AD 150, a Gentile by birth and a philosopher.

[20 : 18] He became a witness, a Christian, through the witness of Christians being martyred. And in his Apology to the Emperor and Antonius Pius, Justin quoted extensively from the words of Christ that are actually found in the gospels.

He couldn't quote from them if they weren't already in the gospels. Tatian was converted under Justin Martyr, apparently wrote many books, but unfortunately only one has survived.

But what is important is that we do know that he compiled a harmony of the four gospels. It's known to us as Tatian's diatessaron. That word diatessaron literally means through the four.

Now only a fragment of that has survived, but the fragment tells us there was the complete one. And you can't write a harmony of four gospels if there aren't four gospels to write a harmony of.

Even I can understand that much. And therefore there must be four gospels even before the time of Tatian. Irenaeus, I love his reasoning. You may not agree with his reasoning, but it makes a point.

[21 : 20] The church leader at Lyon in AD 180, he claimed it is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are since there are four zones of the world and four principal winds.

Now his reasoning may be suspect, but his conclusion is clear. By the mid-second century, only the heretics were trying to add to the four gospels. Tertullian of Carthage, born in AD 155, became one of the strongest defenders of the Christian faith.

He quoted from almost all the New Testament books and he referred to the law and the prophets with the gospels and the apostles. So it's very evident that before the middle of the second century, the four gospels were known.

In fact, the earliest actual list of New Testament books is found in what is known as the Muratoyan Canon, dated around AD 150. And it has the comment that these are accepted by the universal churches.

Not all the 27 books are in that list, but there are only four gospels, and it's the gospels we're talking about. Now during the first 200 years of the church, there were some false gospels compiled by various heretical groups, around 14 in all, depending on how you count them.

[22 : 40] Some we don't have, we only know them by references elsewhere. Most are fragmentary, since they came far too late to be accepted, and they weren't written in the time of the apostles anyway, and they revealed the wild imagination and false teaching of the heretics.

Not one of them, not one of them, was ever considered for inclusion with the four gospels. The first complete list of all our 27 books of the New Testament comes from Origen in the year AD 240.

However, in his attack against the true discourse of Celsus, written in AD 174, Origen comments that the pagan philosopher makes, quote, numerous quotations from the Gospel of Matthew.

You can't make numerous quotations from a gospel that doesn't exist. So the irrefutable evidence of all of these people reveals that by AD 150, the four gospels were known and circulating widely so that even the heretics and pagans could use them to attack the Christian faith.

Now you may think at this point, why on earth do you need to tell us all this? I didn't even doubt it. But you need to know, in a society where Islam is becoming increasingly, increasingly powerful, we have just elected, or some have just elected, our first Islamic mayor of Greater London, and we need to remember that Muslims are told that we have the wrong four gospels.

[24 : 10] That's the reason why I'm telling you this. You need to be sure and confident that there only were four gospels. And when were they completed?

Well, I've alluded to this earlier on, actually, because in 1976, John A.T. Robinson, Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge, recognized as a first-class New Testament scholar, but a liberal scholar, didn't believe in the authority of Scripture, published a book called Redating the New Testament.

And the more he examined the New Testament as a liberal and critical scholar, the more he became convinced that the entire New Testament had been completed before the year AD 70.

Not just the four gospels, the entire New Testament. And the best evidence for this, he said, was that there is no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. We looked at this the other evening.

I don't need to go back over it. There has never been any evidence for the wishful thinking of critics that the gospels were written sometime in the late second century.

[25 : 12] That is yesterday's old news. But you may ask the question, why did it take some time before the gospels were all bound together in complete books?

Because you may be interested to know that the four gospels were not all neatly printed and bound by the Macedonian publishing company at Thessalonica towards the end of the first century and sent out by the camel load to every bookstore and kiosk of the Roman Empire.

There are a number of reasons why it took time. Here are just a few very quickly. The high cost of copying, including the cost of materials, it would have taken a whole week's wages for the gospel of Luke alone to have been copied.

That was expensive. The originals were scattered across the whole empire and they needed to be brought together. No scroll could contain more than one or two books of the New Testament, let alone the gospels.

And that was expensive. And Christians expected anyway the return of Jesus very soon. So they didn't see the need to give us a list, a nice little list.

[26 : 22] Here are the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The gospels as reliable records. A universally accepted principle, again that we've looked at in previous evenings, relating to any document, is that documents ancient or modern, and this is so important to remember and lock into your mind, documents ancient or modern have the right to be taken as a true and correct record unless or until they are proven otherwise.

That is a principle that is used for any ancient document and it ought to apply to the four gospels. There are no contradictions between the accounts, although each presents the material from a different perspective.

Listen, if there had only been one account, one gospel, then the critics would have dismissed it as the fiction of one man, right? So we have four and each is independent of the others.

The best the critics can do, therefore, is to search for contradictions between them and there are none. Two gospels claim either careful examination of the facts or eyewitness accounts.

The five references in John's gospel to the disciple whom Jesus loved has never been adequately explained in any other way than the writer was present, but he was reluctant to put his name forward in the account.

[27 : 48] It was John's humility. There are many authentic details. We looked at these yesterday that are clearly marks of an eyewitness. There's very little doubt about the authorship of the four gospels before the close of the first century.

Papias, remember, he was a contemporary, born before the apostles had all died, and he claimed that John Mark was the author of the gospel under his name. Papias also referred to the gospels of John and the gospel of Matthew.

Two of the early Christian leaders, Irenaeus and Tertullian, both accepted John as the author of his gospel. No other name has ever been suggested, and somebody must have written it.

So we either accept the truth and accuracy of their records, or we claim that all four gospel writers were incredibly successful and deceitful liars, and even more incredibly, no one in the first three centuries came forward with a single piece of evidence to contradict their accounts.

The early enemies of the gospel reinterpreted the miracles of Christ, as we've seen, but there's not a single text in the first three centuries contradicting the accounts of the life of Christ, his death on the cross, and the rumors of his resurrection.

[29 : 06] I'm going to move on to a third of our subjects this evening. Did Jesus die on a cross? The summary of the first part of that, did Jesus die on a cross?

The Watchtower movement, Jehovah's Witnesses, believe that Jesus died on a stake, not a cross. And Islam teaches that although Jesus was crucified, he didn't die on the cross.

That's why I'm asking the question, did Jesus die on a cross? Perhaps the significance of the first part, or the second part, did he die on a cross?

And you might say, well, does that matter that much? The cross of Christ, is only to show that the Jehovah's Witnesses are ignorant of biblical languages, and yet can make a doctrine out of their misunderstanding. And for their part, Islam, whilst believing in the reality of Jesus, dare not accept the reality of his death.

In 1921, Joseph Rutherford, the successor of Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Watchtower movement, claimed that, I quote, the cross of Christ, the cross of Christ, is the greatest pivotal truth of the divine arrangement.

[30 : 17] By 1925, they even illustrated their publications with Jesus on a cross. However, five years later, they changed their mind, and they concluded that Christ was not crucified on a cross, but on a stake.

And their reasoning for it, I won't go into too much detail, is because in Galatians 3.13, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21, 22 and 23, cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree, in reference to Christ's death.

The Hebrew word is, and the Greek word Paul uses, both can refer, and do refer to a pole, or a tree, or simply timber, wood. It's as simple as that.

And they also claim that the Greek word translated cross in the Gospels, literally refers to a stake. Or a pole. So Jesus hung on a pole, or a stake.

And that's how they translate it in the New World Translation of the Bible. They render it by torture stake, and the verb by impale. Now the short answer to all of that is that they misunderstand what was happening, the words.

[31 : 27] The Greeks did not have a word for crucifixion, because they never crucified people, like the Romans did. So they had to use one of their own words, staros, which was the nearest they had.

And that word can mean simply a pole or a stake. But clearly they were talking about crucifixion. And the reason for that is that the Romans crucified thousands of people.

If you know the story of Spartacus, between 5,000 and 6,000 slaves were crucified crucified at the defeat of the uprising under Spartacus.

They crucified only the lower echelons in society. Slaves and criminals could be crucified. No Roman citizen would ever be crucified. Ladies, you're out of it too.

No woman would ever be crucified. But Jesus numbered himself among the slaves and the criminals. And they crucified thousands. And the word they used for that was quite simple.

[32 : 26] Crucifixio. Literally, to fix to a cross. And the first part of the word, of course, is the Latin crux or cross. There's no doubt at all what the Romans meant by a cross. And as I showed you the other evening, we have an early example of graffiti mocking Christians, worshipping a donkey-headed man on a cross.

And that's somewhere in the 2nd or 3rd century. Of course, he died on a cross. Of that, there's no question. But did he die on a cross?

Now, this is particularly interesting when you are debating or talking with a Muslim. You see, an early heresy of the 2nd century church is known as Gnosticism.

Never mind what the word means for the moment. There are various strands, but most of them believe that Christ only seemed to be a real man.

And that the Christ was substituted by another at the cross. Sometimes they believe it was Simon of Cyrene or Judas Iscariot.

[33 : 31] Gnosticism distinguished between Christ and Jesus of Nazareth. So Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, but the Christ didn't. Have you got it? The Christ simply inhabited the body of a man and then withdrew before the cross.

It's quite bizarre. Some of the Gnostic stories have the real Christ peeping behind a column watching the Jesus of Nazareth die on the cross.

Now, the reason I'm telling you this is because you don't really need to know about Gnosticism unless you really want to. But it's appropriate because this is what Islam believes about the death of Christ.

You will read this in the Quran. Allah said, O Jesus, I will cause thee to die a natural death and exalt thee to myself.

Therefore, Jesus was not crucified or killed on the cross, but, quote, he was made to appear to them like one crucified. So remember, when you're talking to a Muslim, they believe Jesus went to a cross, but he didn't die there.

[34 : 39] Muhammad, remember, more than 500 years after the death of Jesus, which is half a millennium, was evidently influenced by Gnostic heresies.

There's a lot in the Quran that reflects Gnostic tendencies. He didn't know real Christians. He was influenced by heresy. Some Muslims today believe that it was Simon of Cyrene or Judas Iscariot who died, and that's exactly what the Gnostics believed.

And they accept what is known as the swoon theory. You've all met that, haven't you? I'm sure some of you have been challenged by friends who have said, well, because he didn't really die on the cross, and he revived after being stolen from the tomb.

Well, let's just have a look at that for a moment and put that one to rest. Apart from a few Gnostic writings, there's not a single reference in any text in the first three centuries that denies death by crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

We've already seen that by some of the Tacitus, by Josephus, by Celsus, and so on. We've seen that. The Jews claimed that his body was stolen, and even the Talmud is suggesting that.

[35 : 53] So it's not just what you read in the Bible. The Talmud is suggesting that. Why didn't they go find the man? That would have been the easier way of scotching the whole thing. But I think more important is this.

In reality, the Romans never allowed anyone to survive crucifixion. That is why the soldiers broke the legs of the two beside Jesus. You probably know this because the only way a man could remain alive on the cross was every time he wanted to breathe, he had to lift himself up painfully by his legs.

If you broke the legs, he would suffocate very quickly. And that's why they broke their legs. The centurion knew a dead man when he saw one and he came to Jesus and all he did was thrust a spear into his side.

There is, when I make the statement that the Romans never allowed anyone to survive a crucifixion, there's one caveat to that. There's one reference, only one ever found so far, of anyone surviving crucifixion.

And it comes actually from the guy we've already been talking about, Flavius Josephus. Towards the end of his brief biography introducing his antiquities, he tells us how he saw three of his friends being crucified.

[37 : 06] And since he was in cahoots with the emperor Titus, he was able successfully to obtain their official release. Three bodies, not yet dead, taken down officially by the authorities.

In this case, the victims were removed before their known death and despite the best attentions of the Roman surgeons, one, only one, survived.

So in all the knowledge we have, no one was ever survived the cross apart from that one man who was officially taken down before he died. That does not apply to Jesus.

To expect anyone to believe that Jesus didn't die on the cross, you have to demand the following scenario. The Roman centurion released the crucified Jesus mistakenly thinking he was dead.

The near lifeless body was placed in a cold tomb and in spite of the guards standing by with strict orders to watch any rescue attempt, it was stolen by the disciples. They nursed back to health this utterly broken man with a deep wound in his side and his hands and his feet and his head and a body smashed by the Roman soldiers before he got to the cross, made him appear in such a way as to convince hundreds that he had miraculously ridden for the dead and then caused him to so completely disappear that he was never seen again.

[38 : 32] If you want to believe that, you're welcome to. I prefer history. The only alternative to that scenario is to deny that Christ was ever on the cross and the Quran clearly states that he was on the cross.

Remember that when you're debating with a Muslim. Which brings us, you'll be relieved to know, towards the end of our subject this evening, did Jesus literally and physically rise from the dead?

Well, you're very familiar with the arguments for this but it doesn't hurt for us occasionally to remind ourselves of them. You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is foundational to the Christian faith and the evidence for it is so strong that only a total commitment to unbelief can deny it.

Simon Greenleaf, do you remember? We looked at him the other evening, was one of the founders of Harvard Law School and his three-volume treatise in the Law of Evidence is still read by law students today.

Greenleaf set out to disprove the resurrection and then became convinced of its reality. He went on to defend the absolute truth of the biblical record of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth in his publication in 1846, Testimony of the Evangelists.

[39 : 56] A very valuable little treatise. You can go online and grab it if you want to. Early in the 20th century, Frank Morrison, some of you will remember, was a London magistrate who set out to disprove the resurrection and convinced himself of its reality.

His book, published in 1930, Who Moved the Stone, was hugely popular. Sir Thomas Inskip was Lord Chief Justice of England in 1940 and he claimed of the resurrection that it was, quote, as well attested as any event in history.

And since then, of course, many books have demonstrated the historical accuracy of the resurrection accounts. I suggest there are five main arguments to support the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

The first is the evidence of all four Gospels and Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Here we have five independent witnesses. How many more do you want?

Universally accepted principles governing the reliability of witnesses, remember, includes the following. The character of the witnesses should be considered trustworthy, incredible, unless proven otherwise.

[41 : 08] Can anybody point a finger at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and Paul? Bring forward your evidence. The number of independent witnesses confirms the greater likelihood of the accuracy of their report.

Five. Would you prefer six or seven or eight? How many? The agreement of their evidence significantly enhances the truth of their record. That's the amazing thing.

They are independent but they come to an agreement. And the reliability of their evidence should be confirmed as far as possible by known events and circumstances. And without going into the detail, all the events and circumstances surrounding the crucifixion of Christ and the burial of Christ are what we know of first century.

All the detail there is what we know of first century burial. Even the fact that the friends or relatives of the crucified person were allowed to take the body of the crucified person if there was anybody to come forward and ask for it.

Hence Joseph and Nicodemus were able to get the body of Jesus and bury it. There is no evidence to question the character of any of the five writers.

[42 : 20] All their evidence agrees in detail and everything written conforms, I say, to what we know from other literature of first century Roman trials and crucifixion and the disposal of the victims.

Second, the agreement of all these witnesses in spite of the claim that there are inconsistencies and contradictions between the four gospel accounts, a coherent record of what happened on those momentous three days has been pieced together by many biblical commentators.

The four accounts are clearly independent of each other which adds significantly to their credibility. Four identical accounts would easily be dismissed as all copying the same source.

So we have four independent accounts with differences in them, not contradictions but bits that the other people don't put in and the critics say therefore they're contradictory. You can't have it both ways as I said the other evening.

You either want four identical accounts which you will dismiss or you have four independent accounts which you dismiss. So what do you look for? Thirdly, the claim of Paul and Peter based upon the impossibility of Christ not rising from the dead.

[43 : 37] You know, you hear so many sermons on Easter Sunday morning that miss this point out completely and it's so important. I prefer to just preach on this one point. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul insisted that if Christ did not literally rise from the dead then the entire Christian faith falls and there's no hope of forgiveness and our final resurrection or eternal life.

And significantly, when Peter was preaching in Jerusalem, he did not recite the many who had actually seen Jesus after the crucifixion. He could, if he had wanted on that occasion, actually call them.

He could have said, hey Demetrius, come across, tell these people about the risen Jesus. John, come up here. I want you to tell these people about the risen Jesus. He could have gone through some of the other apostles.

They were all around. Oh, come and tell them. Hey, come on Thomas, come and tell us. You didn't believe, did you? Come and tell them what you said. He doesn't do any of that. Do you know what Peter says? Very simply, he focused on who Jesus was and he says, God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

That is why I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. All the other evidence is good stuff but this is the heart of it. It was not possible for Jesus to remain dead because of who he was.

[45 : 02] Fourthly, the prophecies of the Old Testament. I'll just give you one of them. Peter continued in his sermon on that day in Acts 2 that the resurrection was prophesied by David in Psalm 16.

You will not abandon me to the grave nor will you let your Holy One see decay. There are more of course. Fifthly, the experience of countless Christians over 2,000 years.

The New Testament writers referred always to Christ as a living friend and saviour who could be known and loved as a real person and not merely a dead memory.

Paul wrote of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord Philippians 3 and wanted the same for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1. Peter reminded the Christians that to them Jesus is precious and that's your experience.

Many of you here this evening that you know Jesus as a friend and a living saviour. He is alive. So, the real Jesus?

[46 : 06] Was Jesus a real person of history? Are the Gospels a reliable record? Did Jesus die on a cross? Did he die on a cross?

And did he literally rise from the dead? And we've taken time to answer these questions but think about it. There's absolutely no hint of a reason to doubt that Jesus was a real figure of history or that the Gospels are an accurate record of who he claimed to be and what his disciples saw and heard during his three years of public ministry.

So also, there's no adequate reason to doubt his death on the cross or his literal resurrection from the grave. But you can't leave it there. Faced with such clear historical evidence that appeals to our reason, we must ask the question, who is this Jesus?

And how must I respond? We can't, we dare not, any of us, shrug him off. The plain evidence leaves us without excuse.

Peter in the streets of Jerusalem boldly declared to the Jews, listen to this, Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did among you through him as you yourselves know.

[47 : 25] This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge and you with the help of wicked men put him to death, nailing him to the cross.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

And years later, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, 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.

I'd like us to pray before we even open it up for questions. Sovereign God, our gracious, eternal Father in heaven, we stand amazed at the record, the account of Jesus Christ, his miraculous birth, conception and birth, his beautiful life, his incredible teaching, his wonderful miracles, his awful death, his glorious resurrection and his final ascension back into heaven.

What a story. Sovereign God, the greatest story ever told. And our hearts weep within us as we think of members of our family, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbours, who mock and scorn or have no interest in the loveliness of our Jesus.

[49 : 16] Give us a passion to tell them what we believe, what we know to be true and convince them as you convinced us of the reality of the one who died and rose so that he might take our guilt and our sin and our punishment upon himself.

In all of our thinking and discussion, help us, Lord, to keep our mind upon the beauty and the wonder of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.