

# Did Jesus Actually Die on the Cross?

## Introduction

There have been myriads of attacks on the Christian faith. Here are the main focuses of these attacks; the reliability of the Word of God, the person of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His resurrection, and His second coming. The critics, skeptics, and haters of God over the years have come up with attacks on the death of Jesus. Early on it was the Gnostics. Other religious groups today including Islam have attacked the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. If Jesus did not die, then no resurrection you see. In this article it is my aim to confirm with irrefutable evidence on the certainty of the death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. How do we know for sure? There was neither autopsy nor a death certificate. There is however; ample medical evidence, trustworthy testimony, eyewitness accounts, and reasonable logical deduction to prove that Jesus Christ did indeed die on the cross. We will focus on the most popular attack on the death of Jesus in what is called the swoon theory.

## The Swoon Theory

With some variations in the theory it boils down to this; the swoon theory is the theory that Jesus never really died on the cross, but that He was crucified and came very close to death. He passed out and went unconscious. It further states that He was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. After three days the coolness of the tomb revived Him and He managed to roll away the stone, come out of the tomb and appear to the disciples making them think He'd risen from the dead.

Now, virtually all biblical scholars recognize the “swoon theory” argument is hopelessly flawed. What is surprising is that it keeps being brought up over and over again. The swoon theory has been thoroughly refuted by many people. Jesus' ordeal was far too serious to permit Him to survive. Can you imagine that Jesus endured six trials, a crown of thorns, a Roman scourge, crucifixion, the spear in the side, loss of blood, 3 days without medical attention, and then overcame an armed guard, walked on pierced feet and somehow or other convinced his disciples that he conquered death and the grave? <sup>1, 2</sup>

## The Medical Evidence for the Death of Jesus Christ

Alexander Metherell, M.D., PH.D. takes a look at the account in the Gospels, plus extensively having studied the historical, archaeological, and medical data concerning the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Metherell does possess the medical and scientific credentials to explain the crucifixion. His conclusion is that Jesus actually died. And yes, even in the case of someone brutally executed on a Roman cross two millennia ago, medical evidence can still make a crucial contribution. What actually happened at the Crucifixion? What was Jesus' cause of death? Is there any possible way he could have survived this ordeal? Those are the kinds of questions that I hoped medical evidence could help resolve. <sup>3</sup>

**The Garden of Gethsemane:** *And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.* **Luke 22:44** This is a known medical condition called hematuria. It's not very common, but it is associated with a high degree of psychological stress. What happens is that severe anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. As a result, there's a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out tinged with blood. We're not talking about a lot of blood; it's just a very, very small amount. What this did was set up the skin to be extremely fragile so that when Jesus was flogged by the Roman soldier the next day, his skin would be very, very sensitive.

**The Scourging:** *So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him.* **John 19:1 Matt. 27:26 Mark 15:15** Roman floggings were known to be terribly brutal. They usually consisted of thirty-nine lashes but frequently were a lot more than that, depending on the mood of the soldier applying the blows. The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, these balls would cause deep bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. And the whip had pieces of sharp bone as well, which would cut the flesh severely. The back would be so shredded that part of the spine

was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down to the back, the buttocks, and the back of the legs. It was just terrible.

As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. A third-century historian by the name of Eusebius described a flogging by saying, “The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” We know that many people would die from this kind of beating even before they could be crucified. At the least, the victim would experience tremendous pain and go into hypovolemic shock. Hypovolemic shock means the person is suffering the effects of losing a large amount of blood. This does four things. First, the heart races to try to pump blood that isn’t there; second, the blood pressure drops, causing fainting or collapse; third, the kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left; and fourth, the person becomes very thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume. Because of the terrible effects of this beating, there’s no question that Jesus was already in serious to critical condition even before the nails were driven through his hands and feet.

**Agony of the Cross:** How certain was death by this crude, slow, and rather inexact form of execution called crucifixion? First of all, the pain was absolutely unbearable, in fact, it was literally beyond words to describe; they had to invent a new word: excruciating. Literally, excruciating means ‘out of the cross.’ Think of that: they needed to create a new word because there was nothing in the language that could describe the intense anguish caused during the crucifixion.

He would have been laid down, and His hands would have been nailed in the outstretched position to the horizontal beam. This crossbar was called the patibulum, and at this stage it was separate from the vertical beam, which was permanently set in the ground. The Romans used spikes that were five to seven inches long and tapered to a sharp point. They were driven through the wrists, pointing about an inch or so below his left palm. Yes, through the wrists. This was a solid position that would lock the hand; if the nails had been driven through the palms, his weight would have caused the skin to tear and He would have fallen off the cross. So the nails went through the wrists, although this was considered part of the hand in the language of the day. And it’s important to understand that the nail would go through the place where the median nerve runs. This is the largest nerve going out to the hand, and it would be crushed by the nail that was being pounded in.

At this point Jesus was hoisted as the crossbar was attached to the vertical stake, and then nails were driven through Jesus’ feet. Again, the nerves in his feet would have been crushed, and there would have been a similar type of pain. His arms would have immediately been stretched, probably about six inches in length, and both shoulders would have become dislocated—you can determine this with simple mathematical equations. “This fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy in **Psalms 22:1-31**, which foretold the crucifixion hundreds of years before it took place and says, ‘My bones are out of joint.’”

**Cause of Death:** Once a person is hanging in the vertical position, crucifixion is essentially an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation. The reason is that the stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the tarsal bones. After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath in. Again he’d have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn’t be able to push up and breathe anymore. As the person slows down his breathing, he goes into what is called respiratory acidosis—the carbon dioxide in the blood is dissolved as carbonic acid, causing the acidity of the blood to increase. This eventually leads to an irregular heartbeat. In fact, with his heart beating erratically, Jesus would have known that he was at the moment of death, which is when he was able to say, ‘Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ And then he died of cardiac arrest.

Even before he died—and this is important too—the hypovolemic shock would have caused a sustained rapid heart rate that would have contributed to heart failure, resulting in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart, called a pericardial effusion, as well as around the lungs, which is called a pleural effusion. Because of what happened when the Roman soldier came around and, being fairly certain that Jesus was dead, confirmed it by thrusting a spear into his right side. It was probably his right side; that's not certain, but from the description it was probably the right side, between the ribs.

The spear apparently went through the right lung and into the heart, so when the spear was pulled out, some fluid—the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion—came out. This would have the appearance of a clear fluid, like water, followed by a large volume of blood, as the eyewitness John described in his gospel. John probably had no idea why he saw both blood and a clear fluid come out—certainly that's not what an untrained person like him would have anticipated. Yet John's description is consistent with what modern medicine would expect to have happened. At first this would seem to give credibility to John being an eyewitness; however, there seemed to be one big flaw in all this. **John 19:34**. When you carefully read what John said, he saw 'blood and water' come out; he intentionally put the words in that order. But according to Dr. Metherell, the clear fluid would have come out first. So there's a significant discrepancy here. This can be explained because the order of words in ancient Greek was determined not necessarily by sequence, but by prominence. This means that since there was a lot more blood than water, it would have made sense for John to mention the blood first.

**“There was absolutely no doubt that Jesus was dead.”**

Alexander Metherell, M.D., PH.D.

## **Predictions from Old Testament Prophets**

Why are the Bible prophecies of Jesus Christ's death so important? These Messianic prophecies below deal with His death. It is a powerful evidence of the accuracy of the Bible and its divine inspiration. Even though these prophecies were written by several different men over many years, they were divinely fulfilled! Here are a handful of the Messianic prophecies fulfilled by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

**The Prophet Isaiah:** *Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.* **Isaiah 53:12**

Full prophecy: **Isaiah 53:1-12**

**The Prophet Daniel:** *And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself...* **Dan. 9:26**

**The Prophet Zachariah:** *And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.* **Zach. 12:10**

**King David:** *For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.* **Psalms 16:10** and again; *Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.* **Psalms 22:16**

## **Jesus Christ's Own Testimony**

Many times Jesus told His disciples that he would be crucified to death; **Matt. 16:21** **Matt. 20:18** **Mark 8:31** **Mark 9:31** **Mark 10:32-34** **Luke 9:22** If Jesus did not actually die on the cross then He would be a liar. Based on the character and nature of Jesus we can trust His testimony. Also He proved what he said by rising from the dead. Consider what John wrote about Jesus' claims of death. *And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” This He said, signifying by what death He would die.* **John 12:32-33** and again; *...that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die.* **John 18:32** Also see **John 2:18-22**

## Eyewitnesses to the Crucifixion

There were many eyewitnesses to the death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Besides the followers of Jesus there were those who stood by the cross that would either be considered neutral to the whole affair or be His enemies.

**Soldiers at the Cross:** Amongst those at the cross were the Roman soldiers. There is an estimated 30,000 people who were executed by crucifixion in the Roman Empire around the time of the life of Jesus. These soldiers were experts in crucifying people. They not only could tell if someone was dead, but because of their own demise, they would never let someone down from the cross alive. The usual punishment for an escaped prisoner was death. **Acts 12:18-19** The soldiers saw Jesus die; *So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"* **Mark 15:39** and **Matt. 20:50-54** **Luke 23:46-47** The soldiers broke the legs of the other two criminals on either side of Jesus. This was to hasten their death because it was the Passover. But when they came to Jesus they saw that He was already dead. **John 19:33** Also one of the soldiers pierced Jesus with a spear. **John 19:34**

**John the Apostle:** John's eyewitness testimony, *And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.* **John 19:35** Read full passage: **John 19:31-37** It was John, who at the cross, Jesus entrusted His mother's care to. **John 19:26-27**

**Mary the Mother of Jesus:** *Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.* **John 19:25** No doubt Mary witnessed her son and her Savior die.

**The Women:** Besides the Lord's mother, there were other women who were near enough to the cross to see Jesus suffer and die. Some of these were the ones who were with Jesus in the height of His ministry. **Luke 8:2-3** The following Gospel accounts refer to these women; *And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar,* **Matt. 27:55** also see **Mark 15:40-41** A detail that is easy to skip over is that the women also saw the body of Jesus in the tomb before the stone had been rolled against it. *And the women who had come with Him from Galilee followed after, and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid.* **Luke 23:55** It is very likely in a courtroom today that Jesus' death would be established on just their testimony.

**The Crowds & Acquaintances:** *And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned. But all His acquaintances, and the women who followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.* **Luke 23:48-49** Besides the women there were others who also witnessed the crucifixion. The general crowds left after Jesus breathed His last, but Jesus' acquaintances stuck around to see what would happen next.

**The Jewish Leaders:** The Jewish leaders are probably the greatest weight of testimony attesting to the fact that Jesus Christ did indeed die on the cross. First of all, it was the Jewish leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, and the lawyers) that desired to put Jesus to death. *And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death.* **John 11:49-53** They went to a lot of trouble to have Jesus falsely tried and condemned by Pilate. They were not about to allow Jesus to escape alive from the cross. The three-phase trial by the Jews, before Jesus was sent to Pilate, was a great display of hatred and persistence in the conspiracy to kill Jesus Christ. And yes the Jews were present at the crucifixion to see it through to the end. **Matt. 27:39-43** **Mark 15:31-32** **Luke 23:35**

## Confirmation of Jesus' Death by Others

**Joseph of Arimathea:** The prophecy of the suffering Messiah. *And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Isaiah 53:9* Had not Joseph claimed the body of Jesus and put it in his own tomb, Jesus would most likely been thrown into the town dump. This was the fate of most crucified victims; they were burned in a garbage dump instead of a decent burial. Joseph was a rich man. **Matt. 27:57** Joseph buried Jesus in his own tomb. **Matt. 27:60** full context **Matt. 27:57-60** By receiving the body of Jesus, preparing the body for burial, and securing the body in the tomb, Joseph was convinced that Jesus Christ had in fact died on the cross.

**Nicodemus:** Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and a teacher in Israel. He is mentioned five times in the Bible, all in the book of John. We can deduct that he in fact became a believer, although Scripture doesn't give any details of his conversion. You must ask yourself, why would he risk his position by helping with the burial of Jesus. *And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. John 19:39* In order to wrap a body with spices and move it to a tomb for burial you are going to notice if the body is dead or not. The swoon theory states that Jesus was unconscious, but not dead. Even if he wasn't, He would be after wrapping Him for burial. The Jews no doubt learned certain burial techniques from the Egyptians. **Genesis 50:24-26** If we look to Lazarus after Jesus raised him from the dead; we see he was fully wrapped and had to have help to remove the grave clothes. **John 11:44** The subtle mention of Nicodemus helping to bury Jesus gives great testimony to Jesus' death.

**The Roman Centurion:** I was reading through the book of Mark recently and noticed a detail that really stood out to me. It is where Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. It was what Pilate did. Here is the verse; *Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. Mark 15:44* full context **Mark 15:42-47** Pilate marveled that Jesus was already dead. It was more common for those who were crucified to die a slow agonizing death that lasted for a couple of days. Jesus died in about six hours. Perhaps Pilate, after having met Jesus, and the fact He claimed to be the Son of God, thought Jesus would have taken a long time to die. After surviving the scourging and that Jesus being a great leader, you would think He would have lasted up on the cross for days fighting every bit of the way. It is no wonder Pilate marveled. Remember also that Jesus said that no one took His life from Him. **John 10:17-18**

Pilate then asked the centurion if Jesus had been dead for some time. This stood out to me because if anyone was sure that Jesus Christ was really dead it would have been this centurion. Pilate did not release the body until it was confirmed by this man that Jesus was in fact dead. This was probably the closest thing to a death certificate and coroner's report we have now days. A centurion was in charge of one hundred men. He was responsible among many other qualifications for that position. Had the centurion been wrong it could have cost him his life. Remember to fulfill Bible prophecy Jesus would not have any of His bones broken **Exodus 12:46** (the slain lamb) **Psalms 34:20** but that he would be pierced in the side. **Zach. 12:10** The reason this was done was to hasten the death of those being crucified that day. When they came to Jesus they saw He was already dead. **John 19:33**

**Pontius Pilate:** As mentioned above Pilate would have never released the body of Jesus if he had not been convinced that Jesus was in fact dead. This makes Pontius Pilate another testament to the death of Jesus after the fact. Pilate commanded the body be given to Joseph. **Matt. 27:57-58**

**The Jewish Leaders:** I mention the Jewish leaders again here pointing out that they had no issue to the reality of Jesus being dead. In a plot to explain His missing body and subsequent resurrection, they refer to Jesus in the past using the phrase; "while He was still alive" *...saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.'* **Matt. 27:63**

**The Angels:** *But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. Matt. 28:5* Although one angel recorded here, we see the role of God's elect angels throughout the ministry of Jesus. They had a strong presence at the resurrection. They testify to the death of Jesus, knowing that He was crucified.

**Two Men on Emmaus Road:** *...So they said to Him, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. Luke 24:19-20* The scope of the news about the death & resurrection of Jesus was now extending outwardly to the populous, which would make it much more difficult to have the death of Jesus be a hoax.

## Outside Biblical Sources

There are many references outside the Bible that verify the existence and death of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. For the sake of lengthiness I will just chose one. The most prominent of these writings is that of Josephus.

Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37 – c. 100) was a Jewish historian born in Jerusalem four years after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth in the same city. His two greatest works are *Jewish Antiquities*, unveiling Hebrew history from the Creation to the start of the great war with Rome in A.D. 66, while his *Jewish War*, though written first, carries the record on to the destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Masada in A.D. 73. Josephus provides the longest *secular* reference to Jesus in any first-century source.<sup>4</sup>

If you want to last long as an historian you would be careful to get your facts straight. Here is an excerpt from Josephus' writings: Antiquities 18:63: At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. **Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die.**

### Endnotes References

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the swoon theory taken from Christian Apologetic & Research Ministry. [www.carm.org/swoon-theory](http://www.carm.org/swoon-theory)

<sup>2</sup> Information on the swoon theory taken from Christian Research Institute. [www.equip.org/perspectives/the-swoon-theory-did-jesus-die-on-the-cross](http://www.equip.org/perspectives/the-swoon-theory-did-jesus-die-on-the-cross)

<sup>3</sup> Taken from *The Case For Easter* by Lee Strobel

<sup>4</sup> Taken from 4 Truth; [http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.2902067/k.C923/Josephus\\_and\\_Jesus.htm](http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.2902067/k.C923/Josephus_and_Jesus.htm)