

# Core Beliefs

## Why Did Jesus Die?



As tragic as the crucifixion sounds, and as impossible the resurrection seems, the whole Christian movement hinges on the fact that Jesus was executed by the Romans and that three days later he came back to life again. Paul writes that, “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). So, while the story of Jesus may raise several questions, the pivotal one is, “Did Jesus actually die on the cross and come back to life again?” If that is true, all the other questions suddenly become less important. If it is not true, they all become irrelevant.

### Why Is the Crucifixion So Important?

Even secular scholars believe that a rabbi named Jesus was executed by the Romans in first century Jerusalem. When it happened, that tragic event caused many to believe that Jesus’ mission was a total failure. Paul responded by saying that while some thought the cross was an exercise in foolishness, “to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). So how could such a tragic loss be proof of God’s power?

Peter told the crowds on Pentecost that Jesus was, “handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23). Jesus had already warned his followers that he was going to be arrested and killed (Mark 9:31). Although it was people with evil intent who tried and crucified Jesus, his death was not an accident or a mistake—it was God’s plan.

### Let’s Start At The Beginning

To understand why God’s plan was for Jesus to die, we have to understand God’s long history with humanity. From the time when God gave his Law to Israel, two things were clear. The first was that God demanded that his people be holy and pure. The second was that it was impossible for them to meet those expectations. From the beginning of humanity, people could not refrain from disobeying God—from sinning.

That’s why the Law also described a way in which flawed people could be restored to a right relationship with God. They were told to make sacrifices—to kill animals and burn them up on an altar. That act would be an act of “atonement”, covering their disobedience and restoring their friendship with God.

Those sacrifices had to meet certain requirements.

- They had to be “spotless” or without defect. You couldn’t sacrifice a sick or lame animal to God.
- They were to be killed. The cost of sin required the death of something important. Their shed blood was

necessary to atone for sins.

- Their blood had to be shed. The blood of the sacrificed animals was collected and sprinkled on the altar and the people understood that the blood had restored them to God's favor.

## God Reveals Some Surprising Bad News

Years after Jesus' death the writer of Hebrews would echo that when he said, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). But he also shared another shocking truth — "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). After all those years of offering sacrifices to be forgiven, he now reveals that those animal sacrifices could never fully do the job.

Paul would confirm that when he said that "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23) and that, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). So humanity faced the terrible reality that everyone sins, that everyone deserves capital punishment, and that the animal sacrifices long practiced by Israel are incapable of removing our guilt.

## A Different Kind of Sacrifice

But God had a plan to restore humans. The writer of Hebrews explains it by saying that Jesus "shared in (our) humanity that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14). He goes on to say that Jesus made, "atonement for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). That's the same language used to describe the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

Just like the animal sacrifices, Jesus was a spotless (sinless) sacrifice. He was crucified as a criminal but he was innocent of any wrongdoing. In fact, John would call him "the lamb of God". Just like a lamb on the altar, his blood was shed when he was nailed to the cross and pierced with a sword. And his death on the cross served as the punishment we deserved for our sins. His execution removed our sins and restored our friendship with God.

Paul brings it all together when he says, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood. . . ." (Romans 3:25). The crucifixion of Jesus was not an accident. God knew we needed a better sacrifice than the blood of animals. Satisfying the punishment for human sin required a human sacrifice—the shedding of blood by someone so pure that he did not deserve to be punished. That's how his death could be applied to all humanity; how his blood could cleanse every person in history.

## The Gospel

The early believers call this story "good news". That word in the original language is where we get our term "gospel". But Paul says that the good news is not just that Jesus died, but that he came back from the dead three days later.

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## Jesus Came Back To Life



You may find it hard to stomach that God intended for Jesus to die, but God knew that there was more to that plan. God was going to restore Jesus to life again and that resurrection would be an important part of the good news about Jesus.

Jesus also told his disciples that his story would not end in death. He repeatedly told them that three days after his death, he would be raised to life again.

### The Story

The accounts of Scripture are in agreement. Jesus was executed on a cross. His lifeless body was taken down by his supporters and placed in a borrowed grave late Friday afternoon. Since there was concern that his disciples would try to steal the body, a Roman guard was set up to protect the grave and a large stone was rolled in place to cover the entrance. They stood guard throughout the Sabbath, but early on Sunday morning, as some women supporters came to visit the grave, an angel from God came with great power and rolled the stone away. The guards were frozen in shock and the angel told the women that Jesus, “is not here. He has risen, just as he said” (Matthew 28:6).

Later Jesus appeared to his other disciples. Thomas wasn’t present but heard those reports and said, “unless I put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). But when Thomas finally saw Jesus, he said, “My Lord and My God!” (John 20:28). Over the next forty days, Jesus appeared to many of his family and followers. On one occasion, 500 people saw him after he came back to life again before he was taken up into heaven (1 Corinthians 15:4-8).

### Is It Believable?

So why should we believe it? The story sounds like a work of fiction, so how could it be true? Secular and religious scholars have explored the story and poured over the evidence and the arguments for the resurrection are stronger today than ever. Even in a world where many question whether a buried body could ever come back to life, the story of the resurrection is the most plausible conclusion to the Jesus story.

The Romans were experts at executing people so there’s no reason to believe that Jesus lived through his crucifixion. They were also good at standing guard, so there’s no reason to believe that a wounded Jesus could have forced his way out or someone could have forced their way in to steal the body. But if the apostles did steal the body, why would they go to their own painful deaths without admitting the fraud. And if the Romans had taken Jesus’ body, they could certainly produce it again when the rumors of the resurrection started circulating.

Some have argued that the resurrection is a fable developed over time, but Luke's research shows that Peter was announcing it as true within two months after Jesus' death. Paul quoted an ancient creed that dates back to a year or so after Jesus' death. It says, "For 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. . ." The story of the resurrection of Jesus was being told immediately afterwards. Eye witnesses were still alive to be questioned and debunked. But the story continued to spread.

## Why Is The Resurrection Crucial?

Although the crucifixion of Jesus is a significant part of the good news story, the resurrection is the culmination. Without the resurrection, we would have no story to tell.

For one, the resurrection confirms Jesus as deity. Throughout history, some have tried to reduce Jesus to a noble teacher, but his victory over death and the grace assures us that he was God in flesh and blood. Paul said that Jesus was, "declared Son of God in power according to the Holy Spirit by the resurrection from the dead. . ." (Romans 1:4). The apostle Thomas thought stories of Jesus' resurrection were unbelievable, but when he saw him face-to-face, he replied, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28).

Another reason that the resurrection is crucial is that it is proof that death will not be the end of our story either. During his ministry, Jesus said he was the resurrection and source of life, and that, "The one who believes in me will live, even though they die" (John 11:25). Paul would say that Jesus was the first of many who would come back to life (1 Corinthians 15:20). He passionately defended the resurrection of Jesus and said, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

## The Story Told in Baptism

That's why baptism is such an impactful symbol of becoming a Christ-follower. Just like Jesus died on the cross and rose to life again, we die to our sins and our self-focused life in baptism. And after that death, we are raised up out of the water—resurrected to a new life, now redeemed by Jesus and empowered by his Spirit. When we are baptized, we reenact what happened to Jesus and through it, God works his spiritual transformation.

## Our Hope Beyond the Grave

Paul writes some of his most compelling statements when he describes what happens after our physical death. He says we will be changed from perishable flesh to a new imperishable body that will live forever. He ends that section with these words, "Death has been swallowed up in victory!" (1 Corinthians 15:54).

**VIDEO:** [What are the Proofs of the Resurrection?](#)