

The Confirmation of Jesus' Death (John 19:31-42)

Jesus was dead. Having been crucified at the hands of the Romans because of the demands of the Jewish leaders, Jesus willingly surrendered His life into the loving arms of God the Father. Jesus was truly dead. John 19:31-42 records confirming evidence for the actual, physical death of Jesus. His death is an essential element of the gospel message. Jesus died for our sins. His physical death made possible His physical resurrection, another essential element of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 Paul describes the gospel as the death and resurrection of Jesus, including Jesus' burial as a proof of His death.

In writing his Gospel, John may have been aware of some growing heresies in his day that claimed that Jesus never really died. Docetism rejected the full humanity of Jesus and therefore claimed that Jesus merely appeared to die. Gnosticism likewise denied Jesus' physical death, separating physical and spiritual realities in a twisted version of Christianity. In fact, one Gnostic writer claimed that Jesus masked His appearance in such a way that it was actually Simon of Cyrene who, having carried Jesus' cross, died that day on that very same cross! Later, Islam would deny the physical death of Jesus. The Koran states that Jesus only appeared to die, since Allah would never allow a prophet like Jesus to die at the hands of His enemies. These false teachings about Jesus' actual death reinforce the importance of John 19:31-42. Jesus truly died, and the events immediately following His death confirm this fact. Jesus' death as a sacrifice for our sins was absolutely necessary for us to receive eternal life. Jesus really died so that you and I can really live.

Jesus' physical death was confirmed by the Roman soldiers (19:31-34).

The events that took place at the cross proved beyond doubt that Jesus had died. The Roman soldiers, experts at execution, confirmed His death by their actions.

The Jewish leaders asked Pilate to speed up the death of those who had been crucified in order to honor the Sabbath Day (19:31).

It was Preparation day, that is, the day preceding the Sabbath—Friday in modern terms. This was a special Sabbath because it coincided with Passover. The Jewish leaders were eager to enjoy the Passover feast at sundown. They also wanted, in their own perverted way, to honor the Old Testament laws. They saw no problem in crucifying an innocent man, but they were eager to have Jesus' body removed from the cross before sundown. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 forbid leaving an executed criminal exposed overnight and required burial before nightfall. With this in mind, the Jewish leaders petitioned Pilate to hasten the death of those who had been crucified that day—Jesus and the two thieves on either side of Jesus. A victim of crucifixion could languish on the cross for hours and even days. Breaking the legs of one who had been crucified would make it impossible for the victim to push his body up and thereby open his airways to breath. To break the legs of someone who was crucified would ensure death by asphyxiation in a matter of minutes.

The soldiers broke the legs of those who were crucified on either side of Jesus (19:32).

Pilate honored the Jewish leaders' request and ordered the soldiers to break the legs of those who had been crucified. The soldiers, no doubt delighted to shorten their day's work, carried out this act immediately. They broke the legs of the first thief, and then the second. Death would come quickly to these men.

Because Jesus was already dead the soldiers did not break His legs but instead pierced His side with a spear (19:33-34).

However, when the soldiers came to Jesus they realized that He was already dead. Jesus had endured extreme torture—beatings and a flogging—in addition to crucifixion. But even more significantly, Jesus had dismissed His spirit to the Father. He gave His life for us. Therefore, the soldiers didn't bother to break Jesus' legs. Instead, one of the soldiers ran his spear into Jesus' side to make certain that Jesus was dead. From Jesus' side flowed blood and water, signs of the fact that Jesus was physically dead. The Roman soldiers, experts at execution, confirmed that Jesus had died. Furthermore, their actions fulfilled ancient prophecies, a fact that John would highlight in this account.

**Jesus' physical death was confirmed
by John's eyewitness testimony (19:35-37).**

John, the disciple of Jesus and the author of the Gospel that bears his name, was an eyewitness to Jesus' death. He claims that his testimony is trustworthy. He also referenced Old Testament prophecies that predicted aspects of Jesus' death.

The author, John, testified personally to the events that took place at the cross (19:35).

John states that he, "the one having seen" these events, bore eyewitness testimony to Jesus' death. That testimony, he claimed, is "true." Then John states that "that one" knows the truthfulness of this testimony. By "that one" John may have Jesus in mind, but more likely he is simply emphasizing the trustworthiness of his own testimony. John's testimony was "true," and he spoke "truthfully." In 1 John 1:1-3 John again emphasized the veracity of his eyewitness account of Jesus. The importance of this eyewitness testimony is evident. John wanted his readers to believe. In John 20:31 John specifically states that he wrote his Gospel so that those who read it would "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" and through belief receive life in Jesus' name. John's eyewitness testimony confirmed the physical death of Jesus on the cross.

The events surrounding Jesus' death perfectly fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (19:36-37).

In addition to his own eyewitness account of Jesus' death, John brings forward the testimony of prophetic Scripture. According to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12, the Jews were not to break any bones in the sacrificial Passover lambs. Because Jesus is our Passover lamb, it was necessary to satisfy these commands. More specifically, John cites Psalm 34:20 which

predicts that not one bone would be broken—applying this verse to the Lord Jesus Christ as a messianic prediction. The fact that the soldiers didn't break Jesus' legs was prophetically pertinent. John then cites Zechariah 12:10 which anticipates a day in which the Jewish people will look on their Messiah "whom they pierced." The soldier's act of piercing Jesus' body with a spear fulfilled this prophetic description of the Messiah. These very details of prophecy and their fulfillment again prove the authority of God's Word as well as the certainty of Jesus' physical death.

**Jesus' physical death was confirmed by
His burial in the garden tomb (19:38-42).**

Jesus' burial and the way in which He was buried confirm the fact that Jesus had truly died physically. First Corinthians 15:4 includes Jesus' burial as a confirming proof of His sacrificial death, the core of the gospel message. All four Gospels include the burial of Jesus' as a part of the redemptive story and the backdrop to the Jesus' resurrection.

Joseph of Arimathea secured permission to retrieve and bury Jesus' body (19:38).

A man from the village of Arimathea by the name of Joseph for the first time enters into the story of Jesus. Joseph was a wealthy member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that had voted to crucify Jesus (Mark 15:43). He had, apparently, not consented to this decision but had so far kept his belief in Jesus as the Messiah a secret. He feared what others would think about him. How many Christians have shrunk from their gospel witness due to fear of others! But now, at last, Joseph stepped up publicly and requested from Pilate the responsibility of caring for Jesus' burial. Pilate granted Joseph permission, and Joseph went to the place of crucifixion to provide a proper burial for Jesus. Joseph likely had help in taking Jesus' body from the cross, carrying out the gruesome task of removing the nails, and finally transporting the body to the place of burial. No longer did Joseph hide his faith.

Joseph along with Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body for burial according to Jewish customs (19:39-40).

Another Jewish leader by the name of Nicodemus joined Joseph in burying Jesus. Nicodemus had previously interviewed Jesus and learned about spiritual rebirth (John 3:1-3). He had also pointed out to the other Jewish leaders that they should not condemn Jesus until they had heard Him (John 7:50-52). Nicodemus, like Joseph of Arimathea, would not have consented to Jesus' crucifixion. Now that Jesus was dead, Nicodemus helped Joseph bury Jesus. Nicodemus brought about seventy-five pounds of aromatic spices—myrrh and aloes—to use in the burial procedures. This generous contribution demonstrated, no doubt, Nicodemus' great respect for Jesus. Together, Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body, incorporating the spices into the linen strips (grave clothes). This procedure followed the standard Jewish burial customs of the day.

Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus in a nearby garden tomb (19:41-42).

Having wrapped His body, Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus. Near the place of crucifixion, which would have been outside the city walls of Jerusalem, was a garden and in that garden a new tomb. Tombs were carved from the stone outcroppings around the city. These served as temporary resting places for a deceased person's body while it decayed. The bones would then be relocated to a smaller burial vault. This garden tomb had never been used before. It seemed a fitting place for Jesus' burial. Joseph and Nicodemus tenderly placed Jesus' body in this new tomb. Its proximity to the place of crucifixion also made it possible for these highly religious men to complete their work before sundown on that Preparation day. No doubt others observed these burial proceedings and took note of the location of Jesus' tomb. Events that transpired on the third day would prove this to be true. But for now Jesus was dead, His body buried. His burial confirmed His death. Jesus' followers had lost their leader. Most assumed that their dreams of a Messiah and His kingdom were lost forever. But God had a greater plan. Jesus' death would result in life. Jesus really died so that you and I can really live.