

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 19,

Matthew 27-28

6-min. Video Overview

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So, we all know the story of the crucifixion, right? At least, we think we do. In this explainer, we're going to peel back the layers of tradition and art to get to the raw, historical details you probably haven't heard before. Okay, let's just start right here.

This quote from Dr. Craig Keener immediately shatters the most common image we all have in our heads. The reality of this event was far more brutal and way more stripped of dignity than centuries of paintings have led us to believe. So, first up, let's get into the human side of things.

The little logistical details that often get glossed over but add so much depth to the story. You know, the first person we meet on the road to the cross isn't a disciple, but a man named Simon of Cyrene. Now, Cyrene was a big city over in North Africa with a large Jewish population, so Simon was most likely in Jerusalem as a pilgrim for the Passover festival.

And under Roman law, a soldier could literally grab any civilian off the street and force them into temporary labor. And that's exactly what happened to this poor guy. And this detail tells you so much.

Simon wasn't just, you know, helping out. He was forced into service because Jesus, after being brutally scourged, was so physically broken that he couldn't even carry the heavy wooden cross beam himself. That tells you just how devastating the torture had already been before he even got to the execution site.

All right, now let's talk about the crucifixion itself. We're going to strip away all the sanitized layers and get to the brutal historical reality of what this punishment was actually like. And wow, this really lays it bare, doesn't it? Our perception is this serene, almost peaceful moment.

But the historical reality? Crucifixion was a punishment for the lowest of the low: slaves, rebels. It was a public spectacle, performed naked, and designed not just to kill, but to inflict the absolute maximum amount of shame and humiliation possible. So how did a person actually die on a cross? Well, it was a horrifically slow process.

It started with massive blood loss from the scourging. Then came severe dehydration from being exposed to the elements. But the ultimate cause of death, believe it or not, was often asphyxiation.

The way the body hangs makes it incredibly difficult to breathe. You'd have to constantly push yourself up just to get a breath, and eventually you'd just be too exhausted to continue, and you would suffocate. And you know that sign you always see placed above the cross in paintings? Well, it had an official name, the titulus.

This wasn't just a name tag; it was a legal document, a placard stating the *causa pone*, that's Latin for the cause of punishment. It was the official charge. And for Jesus, that charge was high treason, the king of the Jews.

But right in the middle of all of this public horror, the gospel accounts record a series of just extraordinary events. These were signs that followers interpreted as a kind of divine commentary on what was happening. The gospel of Matthew talks about three hours of darkness covering the land in the middle of the day, a massive earthquake, and, get this, even the tombs of righteous people being opened.

Now, you have to understand, in Jewish tradition, these kinds of supernatural signs were often expected to happen at the death of a really significant righteous person. This is how the earliest followers understood the cosmic importance of what they were witnessing. And in the middle of this chaos, a brand new figure steps onto the stage.

While the main male disciples are basically in hiding, a wealthy and up until now secret follower named Joseph of Arimathea steps forward to do something incredibly courageous. But what was so risky about his request? I mean, he's just asking for the body of a dead man, right? What's the big deal? Well, by asking for the body, Joseph was publicly siding with an executed enemy of Rome. That alone could have gotten him charged with high treason.

And here's the kicker. Roman governors like Pontius Pilate were notorious for executing wealthy people on flimsy charges just so they could legally confiscate all their property. Joseph was literally risking everything: his reputation, his fortune, and his life.

So Joseph's incredibly brave act ensures a proper burial, which then sets the stage for the next and most pivotal part of the story, the claim of the resurrection. And it turns out it's built on some really specific and, frankly, peculiar pieces of evidence. So just how early did this evidence show up? Well, look at this timeline.

The crucifixion happens around 30 AD. But we have archaeological evidence that the location of the tomb was an established tradition before 44 AD. How do we know? Because that's when the city walls of Jerusalem expanded to include the site.

You always buried your dead outside the city walls. No one would invent a holy site and place it inside the new city limits. It suggests the tradition is rooted within just 14 years of the event itself.

And on top of that, you have the eyewitnesses. The Apostle Paul, writing around 55 AD, quotes an even earlier Christian creed, something they were all saying way before he wrote it down. And that creed claimed that over 500 people saw Jesus alive after his death.

500! That's a massive number of people to account for. But maybe the most historically compelling detail is also the most counterintuitive one. Why on earth, in a patriarchal ancient culture, would the Gospels report that women were the very first witnesses to the empty tomb? And this slide gets right to the heart of it.

In first-century Jewish and Roman society, a woman's testimony held almost no legal weight. Some sources even said it was as unreliable as a thief's. So think about it.

If you were inventing this story from scratch, trying to make it believable, you would never choose the least credible people in your entire culture to be your star witnesses. Historians call this the criterion of embarrassment. It strongly suggests the authors were just reporting what they believed happened, no matter how culturally inconvenient it was.

So in the immediate aftermath of that weekend, the city of Jerusalem is left with two radically different explanations for the empty tomb. It's truly a tale of two competing reports. This table lays out the conflict perfectly.

On one side, you have the women's report. He is risen. On the other side, the guards' report: the body was stolen.

One story is based on a divine commission from a personal encounter. The other is based on a bribe born out of fear and grief. And this quote just hits the nail on the head, doesn't it? The guard story makes no sense.

I mean, think about it. Their one job, their only job, was to secure that tomb. To go back and say the body was stolen while they were on duty is admitting to a complete and total failure.

For Roman soldiers, that was an offense that could get you executed. It's just not a plausible explanation. And this leaves us with the final provocative question at the very center of the story.

The women were commissioned with a message of resurrection. The guards were bribed to spread a story of theft. So which report gets passed on? And which report do you think ended up shaping the next 2,000 years of human history?