

“The Case for Christ: Evidence Outside the Bible”

Date: May 13, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Texts:** Matthew 27:45-50; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

Theme: apologetics, biblical credibility

Occasion: Case for Christ, series

Is the Bible reliable? Is there any basis for it found outside of the Bible itself? In the passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he makes sure to tell us that the resurrection was not just a fairy tale that someone concocted to give people hope. It really happened, and there were eyewitnesses.

Jesus first appeared to Peter, Paul writes, then to the other remaining disciples. And not just to them, but also to 500 disciples of Jesus at the same time. And then to James and lastly to Paul himself.

He’s arguing that there are witnesses to the things that are being claimed, and that many of those are still alive at the time of the writing of this letter. If you doubt his word, go find them and ask them yourself, he’s saying in the letter.

But that letter was written over 2,000 years ago by a very biased witness. Is there anything outside of the Bible that can corroborate the testimony of scripture? Did any ancient historians write about Jesus? Is there any archaeological evidence that supports what we read in the Bible?

As we build our case for Christ, today we want to look at the evidence outside of the Bible. As we discovered in last Monday night’s study group, there is a *lot* of evidence that supports the case for Christ.

So, let’s call our first witness to the stand, Josephus the historian. Who is this witness? “Josephus was a very important Jewish historian of the first century. He was born in AD 37 and he wrote most of his four works toward the end of the first century.

“He was a priest, a Pharisee, and he was somewhat egotistical. His most ambitious work was called “The Antiquities,” which was a history of the Jewish people from Creation until his time. He probably completed it in about AD 93.” – Edwin M. Yamauchi

So what did Josephus write that is so important to our case? Listen to this one paragraph in his work “Testimonium Flavianum.” “Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. When Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him first did not forsake him. And the tribe of Christians so named for him are not extinct to this day.”

This is hugely important. An outside witness verifies key points to the testimony of Jesus’ life. Just from the words of Josephus we learned this: Jesus was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem. We learned that he was a wise teacher who had established a far-reaching and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

And we know Josephus to be a reliable and accurate historian. In his accounts of the Jewish War, archaeological excavations at Masada have verified what he reported. His mentioning of Jesus is extremely important.

Okay, but that’s only one person. Are there any other ancient records that Jesus existed? Yes, for our next witness we call to the stand Tacitus, a second century historian. Tacitus recorded what is probably *the* most important reference to Jesus outside of the New Testament. In AD 115 he explicitly states that Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats. His

reason for doing so was to divert suspicion away from himself for the great fire that had devastated Rome in AD 64. Listen to what Tacitus wrote:

“Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christos (referring to Jesus) from whom the name Christian had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.

“Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty (of being a Christian); then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as hatred against mankind.” – Tacitus, *Annals*

We now have two witnesses outside the Bible that Jesus was an actual historical person, and not merely a fable as some today claim. Neither Tacitus nor Josephus were Christians themselves and neither one of them was trying to bolster the claims of the Christian faith. They were not only objective witnesses, but possibly even hostile witnesses, who have verified for us that Christ existed. The evidence is mounting.

But what about some of the things recorded in the New Testament that seem rather bizarre and unusual. Do we have anyone besides a Christian claiming they happened? Lee Strobel writes, “To me, one of the most problematic references in the New Testament is where the Gospel writers claim that the earth went dark during part of the time that Jesus hung on the cross. (the passage I read as our Gospel lesson today.) Wasn’t this merely a literary device to stress the significance of the crucifixion, and not a reference to an actual historical occurrence? After all,

if darkness had fallen over the earth, wouldn't there be at least some mention of this extraordinary event outside the Bible?" – Lee Strobel

That's a good question. And we have evidence that this phenomenon was visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities. According to Tertullian... it was a 'cosmic' or 'world event.' Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria, writing a chronology soon after AD 137, reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad, that is AD 33, there was 'the greatest eclipse of the sun' and that 'it became night in the sixth hour of the day (that would be noon) so that the stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia and many things were overturned in Nicaea.'" – reported by Historian Paul Maier

Once again, there are witnesses outside of the Bible who can testify that things reported to have happened, did indeed happen. We can trust the words of Scripture. It is credible.

For my last witness today, I call to the stand Pliny the Younger. "Pliny, can you tell us how you got your name, the Younger?" "Why yes. I am known as Pliny the Younger because I am the nephew of another man by the name of Pliny, who went by the name of Pliny the Elder. He was a great writer who recorded much of the goings on of our times. Sadly, he died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79.

"Now Pliny the Younger, you had a relationship with the Emperor of Rome, did you not?" "Yes, I did. He and I were friends and we often wrote letters back and forth to one another."

"And in any of his letters to you, Mr. Pliny the Younger, did Emperor Trajan ever discuss the people known as Christians with you?"

"Yes, in one of his letters he wrote about them quite a bit."

“Mr. Pliny, we have here a copy of that letter which we will enter into the court as evidence. Would you please read the indicated passage where Emperor Trajan talks about these Christians?”

Pliny reads the letter from the Emperor: “I have asked them if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished....”

“They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery.”

“This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they called deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.”

“And Mr. Pliny, were either you or the Emperor friends of these so-called Christians?”

“Absolutely not! They were enemies of Rome. They wouldn’t give up their belief in this man Jesus, even if we threatened to torture and kill them.”

“I thank you, Mr. Pliny. Your testimony has been quite useful.”

And now, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this concludes this session of our testimony where we have presented credible evidence outside of the Bible. We believe we have demonstrated beyond a

reasonable shadow of a doubt, that the man Jesus did exist, and that the things reported about him in the New Testament are accurate and true.

We believe the best evidence we have, to know about the life of Jesus, is found in the Bible. But if we only had the historical evidence, without the New Testament, there is still enough information to give an outline of his life. Simply based on historical evidence we know this much:

First, Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Second, many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms. Third, some people believed he was the Messiah. Fourth, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders. Fifth, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius.

Sixth, despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64. And seventh, all kinds of people from the cities and countryside, men and women, slave and free, worshiped him as God.

And so I ask you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how important is truth to you? Some would say that the story of Jesus Christ is a feel-good story that is too good to be true. Others would say there are no facts to support it, and that Jesus was simply a mythological figure who never existed. Many think the Bible is unreliable. The evidence contradicts all of those allegations.

We believe the evidence is clear – both in scripture and in history, that Jesus existed and he is who he says he is. Psalm 145:18 says, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.” Are you willing to call on the Lord right now? Call on him and he will draw near to you. Believe the evidence, both of scripture and of history. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel, Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, 2016; pp. 106-133; and the study guide by the same name and author, pp. 36-39.