

Did He Die?

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

▪ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group gives the survival hypothesis its strongest form, then tests it against the Roman machinery of death, the earliest hostile and neutral sources, and the text itself, and discovers whether “Jesus died on the cross” can enter the ledger.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 645-646: even the witnesses distinguished resurrection from resuscitation. They had seen Lazarus. What they claimed for Jesus was categorically different, and that difference will matter tonight.

▪ What You Need to Know

Tonight is your friend’s night. His working theory, that Jesus was crucified and somehow survived, is the oldest naturalistic explanation of Easter on record, argued seriously by scholars such as Karl Venturini around 1800 and revived periodically since. Treat it as what it is: a real attempt to honor the evidence he already grants. Your job is to present it better than he would, then let the evidence speak. If the steelman feels weak, the whole night fails.

Know the machinery. Roman scourging with the flagrum, a whip of leather thongs set with metal and bone, preceded crucifixion and by itself sometimes killed. Crucifixion was death by slow trauma; the exact final mechanism is debated among modern researchers (asphyxiation, hypovolemic shock, cardiac rupture, or a combination), and you should say so rather than overclaim. What is not debated is Roman competence. Execution squads under a centurion certified deaths as a matter of military duty; the crurifragium of John 19:32, breaking the legs, existed precisely to finish victims quickly, and the spear thrust of John 19:34 reads most naturally as a stroke meant to make certain of death. The evangelist reports that blood and water came out. Some medical writers read that as consistent with fluid separation in a body already dead; present that as a possible reading, not a load-bearing proof. The evangelist himself offers no medical theory at all, which is itself worth noticing. He records what he does not understand, and the case for the death stands on the plainer sequence: scourging, crucifixion, soldiers finding him dead, the spear, the centurion’s report, the released body.

Face the steelman’s best texts honestly, because the group will find them. Mark 15:44: Pilate himself “wondered if he were already dead.” Jesus died faster than crucifixion victims often did. And Josephus, in his autobiography, recounts finding three crucified acquaintances still alive, begging Titus to take them down, and Rome’s best physicians saving one. Survival of crucifixion was not, in the abstract, impossible. Read both of those aloud tonight for the survival theory, not against it. Then let the same texts turn: Pilate’s surprise is followed by verification, a formal question to the supervising centurion, and Rome released the body only on that certification. And the Josephus episode is the theory’s undoing wearing its clothes: those three men were taken down alive, deliberately, into immediate expert care, and two of the three died anyway. None of the three had been scourged half to death first, and none had taken a spear to the chest.

Then there is the argument from a fellow skeptic. David Friedrich Strauss, the nineteenth century’s most formidable critic of the Gospels, rejected the survival theory in one devastating paragraph: a half-dead man who crept out of the tomb needing bandaging and nursing could never have given his disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death, the Prince of Life, and that impression is the one historical certainty at the bottom of their preaching. A survivor does not found Easter faith; he

finds a sickbed vigil, and then he dies, and the faith dies with him. Strauss was no Christian. His point stands on skeptical ground.

Finally the Catholic point that quietly strengthens the whole case: the Church herself insists the resurrection was not resuscitation (CCC 646). The witnesses knew resuscitation; some had watched Lazarus stumble out still bound in grave clothes and go on to age and die again. What they claimed for Jesus, “death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9), is a different category altogether. A survived crucifixion would give you Lazarus with worse wounds. It cannot give you what they actually preached.

One caution for fidelity: when tonight’s sources mention the role of Jerusalem’s leadership, keep CCC 597 in view. The Church teaches that responsibility for the death of Jesus cannot be laid on all the Jews of that time, still less on Jews of later times. Say it if the topic arises.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah’s Servant is not roughed up and rescued; he is “cut off out of the land of the living” and assigned a grave (Isa 53:8-9). Psalm 22, on the lips of Jesus from the cross, describes the sufferer’s hands and feet pierced (Ps 22:16). And Zechariah promises a day when “they look on him whom they have pierced” (Zech 12:10), the very text St. John cites as fulfilled by the spear (John 19:37). Tonight’s discovery hunt sends the group from John 19:36-37 backward to Zechariah 12:10 and to the Passover rule that no bone of the lamb be broken (Ex 12:46). Let them find the connections themselves.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch • *Letter to the Trallians 9, written on the road to martyrdom, c. AD 107*

“[Jesus Christ] was truly born, and ate and drank. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and died... He was also truly raised from the dead.” (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, lightly abridged.) Within living memory of the apostles, against early sects claiming Jesus only seemed to suffer, a bishop being marched to his own execution hammers one word: truly. The reality of the death was the first thing the Church defended, before she defended anything else.

St. Melito of Sardis • *On the Pascha (Peri Pascha), second century*

In one of the earliest Christian sermons we possess, Melito preaches the crucifixion with shocking directness, pressing the paradox that the one suspended on the tree was the very one who suspended the earth, and that the Master was slain. A summary in our words; his point for tonight is that the earliest preaching did not soften the death. It magnified it.

St. John Chrysostom • *Baptismal Catecheses 3, read by the Church in the Office of Readings for Good Friday*

Chrysostom preaches on the blood and water from Christ’s side: in substance, that the Church herself is born from the side of Christ asleep in death, as Eve was drawn from the side of Adam, the water and the blood standing for baptism and the Eucharist. For Chrysostom the spear wound is not an embarrassment to be explained away; it is a fountain. A summary of his sermon in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 645-646:** the risen Christ’s humanity is real, touchable, and glorified; his resurrection “was not a return to earthly life” like the raisings of Jairus’s daughter, the young man of Naim, and Lazarus, who all died again.
- **CCC 597:** responsibility for the death of Jesus cannot be attributed to all Jews then living nor to Jews today.
- **CCC 619:** Christ truly died; his death is part of the mystery of God’s plan, confessed in the Creed.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Tonight's candidate lines appear in the Discussion Guide. The last one, "Jesus died on the cross," is the biggest signature of the study so far. If your friend holds, honor it visibly and note that Session 3's evidence bears on it too; a held line is a live line.

Thread 3. The discovery hunt (Zech 12:10, Ex 12:46) feeds "in accordance with the scriptures."

Thread 4 planted tonight. After CCC 646 is read, say it once and let it sit: the witnesses had seen a resuscitation. They knew the difference. Do not resolve it; it returns in Session 8.

▪ Leading This Study Well

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

The co-investigator voices the steelman. Tonight the co-investigator, not the one who holds the theory, should present the survival theory at full strength. Your friend then hears his own position honored in someone else's mouth before he is ever asked to defend it, and he is free to strengthen it further. This single move sets the tone for the whole study.

Do not spike the ball. When the Josephus card lands (two of three died with Rome's best care), let it land in silence. No "see?" No summary victory lap. The facts are heavy enough; triumphalism would lighten them.

If he signs nothing tonight, the night still worked. He watched believers steelman his own theory honestly. That is the deposit.

▪ Session Goals

1. The survival hypothesis is presented at full strength by the co-investigator, with its two best evidences on the table (Mark 15:44; Josephus, Life 420-421).
2. The group weighs the Roman machinery of death and the certification sequence in John 19:31-37.
3. The group reads the non-Christian attestations of the death (Tacitus; the skeptical scholarly consensus).
4. Strauss's objection is heard from skeptical ground.
5. Ledger lines proposed; Thread 4 planted via CCC 646.

▪ Time Note

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper medical box and the Lucian mention. Never cut the steelman, the Josephus card, or the Strauss box; they are the architecture of the night.

Did He Die?

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we look hard at a death. Give us clear eyes, honest speech, and respect for one another's questions. Amen.

▪ Win

1. Tell about a time you were sure of something and turned out to be wrong. What finally convinced you?
2. How do you decide whom to trust about events none of us witnessed: a battle, a plague, an assassination? What makes an ancient report credible or not credible to you?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Mark 15:15-39.

1. List everything this text says Jesus endured before the cross itself. What condition is a man in after that?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Scourged (15:15); mocked, crowned with thorns, struck on the head with a reed (15:17-19); marched out, so weakened that Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the beam (15:21). Roman scourging with the flagrum tore flesh to muscle and sometimes killed by itself. The man who reaches Golgotha in this account is already in traumatic shock. Keep this list; it matters when we weigh survival.

2. Now the survival theory's best verse. Read Mark 15:44-45. Pilate "wondered if he were already dead." What does his surprise honestly tell us, in both directions?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Honestly for the theory: Jesus died faster than crucifixion victims often did; even the governor noticed. Honestly against it: surprise triggered verification. Pilate "summon[ed] the centurion, and asked him whether he was already dead," and released the body only "when he learned from the centurion that he was dead." The one man professionally accountable for the execution certified the death to the governor's face. Mark, writing while Roman procedure was universally known, invites exactly this check.

STEELMAN • The Survival Hypothesis, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; anyone may add whatever makes it stronger.

READ ALOUD. Jesus was on the cross only about six hours (Mark 15:25, 34), far less than the days victims could linger. Pilate himself was surprised. Crucifixion survival was physically possible: Josephus records a man surviving after being taken down (card below). No physician certified this death; a fainting spell or deep shock could be mistaken for it by soldiers eager to finish before the feast. The tomb was cool; the aloes and linen could act as dressings; the great stone was rolled away by human hands from outside; and the "appearances" that followed were of a recovered man, which would explain why his followers were so sure they had seen him bodily. On this theory nothing supernatural is needed, and everything

already granted at this table is preserved.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, The Life 420-421

Jewish historian, eyewitness account of the siege of Jerusalem's aftermath, c. AD 99. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain.

"...I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery..."

Josephus then records the outcome: even under that care, two of the three died; only one recovered.

3. Read the card twice: once as evidence *for* the survival theory, once as evidence about its odds. What do you notice?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

For the theory: survival was genuinely possible; this text proves it. About the odds: these three were taken down alive, on purpose, by order of the commanding general, into the immediate care of Roman physicians, and two of the three died anyway. They had not first been scourged to collapse, and none had been speared. The only ancient case of crucifixion survival on record required rescue plus expert care and still failed two times out of three. The survival theory needs a scourged, speared, certified-dead man, sealed without care in a tomb, to beat those odds alone, then walk on wounded feet.

Read aloud: John 19:31-37.

4. Walk through the sequence as a procedure. Why break legs? Why the spear? And what came out?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The crurifragium existed to end crucifixions fast; the soldiers break the two others' legs but find Jesus "already dead" and do not break his (19:33), which the evangelist ties to the Passover lamb rule. Instead a soldier drives a spear into his side, a thrust whose evident purpose is to make death certain, from a squad whose duty was completed deaths. "At once there came out blood and water" (19:34). Some modern medical writers read separated blood and watery fluid as consistent with a body already dead; hold that as a possible reading rather than a proof, because the argument does not need it. The evangelist offers no theory at all. He records a detail he does not interpret, insists an eyewitness saw it, and a writer inventing a survivable wound would have invented a smaller one.

5. Discovery hunt: John says these things fulfilled Scripture (19:36-37). Find the sources: Exodus 12:46 and Zechariah 12:10. What is John claiming by the connections?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Exodus 12:46: no bone of the Passover lamb may be broken; John presents Jesus dying as the true Lamb at Passover. Zechariah 12:10: "when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn," a text about God's own pierced one. The unbroken bones and the piercing are, for John, not accidents of procedure but signatures. Add both finds to Thread 3's question: which scriptures?

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Tacitus, Annals 15.44

Roman senator and historian, no friend of Christians, writing c. AD 116 on Nero's persecution. Translation:

Church and Brodribb (1876), public domain.

“Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...”

6. What does Rome’s own historian, writing with contempt, confirm? And notice his aside: what “broke out” again after being “checked”?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Execution under Pilate in Tiberius’s reign: the core fact, from a hostile pen with access to Roman records and no Christian source in his hands he would have trusted. “The extreme penalty” is death; Tacitus reports no survival rumor, and neither does any ancient enemy of the faith. His aside is its own puzzle: the movement was “checked” by its founder’s execution, exactly as executions are supposed to work, and then “again broke out.” Something restarted it. That question belongs to Session 6, but log it now. Note also that among modern scholars, including those most skeptical of Christianity, the death of Jesus by crucifixion is about as close to unanimous as ancient history gets; John Dominic Crossan, co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, has written that his crucifixion is as sure as anything historical can ever be.

STEELMAN • A skeptic answers the survival theory: David Friedrich Strauss

READ ALOUD. Strauss, the nineteenth century’s most influential critic of the Gospels and no believer, rejected the survival hypothesis in substance as follows: a man who had crept half dead out of the tomb, weak and ill, needing bandaging and nursing and indulgence, and who at last still succumbed to his wounds, could not possibly have given the disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death and the grave, the Prince of Life. Yet that impression is the bedrock of their entire subsequent ministry. (A close summary of Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, vol. 1; the passage is among the most quoted in the literature.)

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. The survival theory must explain not a sighting but a transformation, worship, and a proclamation of victory over death by monotheistic Jews. A convalescent explains none of that. And a survivor eventually dies. Where is that second death in any record, friendly or hostile? The theory replaces one missing body with another.

Read aloud: CCC 646 (printed on tonight’s Take-Home), then Romans 6:9.

For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Romans 6:9 (RSV2CE)

7. The witnesses had seen Lazarus come back (John 11) and go on living an ordinary mortal life. What are they claiming for Jesus that they never claimed for Lazarus?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Not a reprieve but a conquest: “will never die again.” The Church’s own teaching (CCC 646) is that the resurrection was not a return to earthly life like Lazarus’s. This cuts against the survival theory from an unexpected direction: even if a man had survived the cross, the most that could produce is another Lazarus, a mortal recovering. The witnesses knew that category intimately, and they insisted this was not that. Hold this thought; it returns in Session 8.

DIG DEEPER

The medical literature: a widely cited 1986 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ”) reconstructed the scourging and

crucifixion and concluded that the evidence indicates Jesus was dead before the spear wound. Be honest about its epistemic status: it answers the question “if the accounts describe what happened, was death certain?” It tests the story’s internal coherence with modern medicine, and the story passes. The blood and water detail, recorded without explanation by a writer who could not have known its significance, is the piece that most impresses physicians. Also debated among researchers: the final mechanism of death in crucifixion generally (asphyxiation, shock, cardiac causes); certainty about the that does not require certainty about the how.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Jesus was scourged and crucified by a professional Roman execution squad.
- *Proposed:* The squad and its centurion were accountable to the governor for completed executions, and the body was released only on the centurion’s certification.
- *Proposed:* The earliest hostile and neutral sources report his death; none reports a survival.
- *Proposed:* Jesus died on the cross. (*The big one. Sign or hold; a hold is honored, and the line stays open.*)

▪ **Send**

1. If the survival theory were true, what would you expect the movement’s earliest enemies to have said about the tomb and the body? Next week we will read what they actually said.
2. What, if anything, would you still need to see before signing the last ledger line?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read John 19:31-37 once on your own, slowly, as if you were a coroner reading a report. Write down one detail you had never noticed.
- This week, notice how often you trust certifications by professionals you have never met: pilots, pharmacists, engineers. What makes such trust reasonable?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, we have looked at your death tonight without flinching. Whatever each of us believes about what came next, teach us what it cost. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Mark 15:39 (RSV2CE)

Did He Die?

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Mark 15:15-39 • read aloud (scourging through death)
- Mark 15:25, 34 • steelman (six hours)
- Mark 15:44-45 • read aloud (Pilate's surprise and the certification)
- John 19:31-37 • read aloud (crurifragium, spear, blood and water)
- Exodus 12:46 • discovery hunt (unbroken bones)
- Zechariah 12:10 • discovery hunt (the pierced one)
- Psalm 22:16; Isaiah 53:8-10 • leader background (OT roots)
- Romans 6:9 • read aloud (Thread 4)
- John 11 • leader background (Lazarus contrast)
- Mark 15:39 • memory verse
- CCC 645-646, 597, 619 • doctrine anchors; 646 read aloud

Source cards tonight: Josephus, Life 420-421; Tacitus, Annals 15.44. Both printed above in full excerpt with public domain translations.