

# Neighborly Apologetics

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## Neighborly Apologetics

### Jesus and the Resurrection, Part 4

#### **Did Jesus Really Die? Historical, Medical, and Theological Evidence**

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [August 8, 2023](#))

In a world quick to question ancient events, Del Tackett's Neighborly Apologetics Webinar (Class 7), originally aired August 8, 2023, tackles one of Christianity's most foundational yet contested claims: the death of Jesus Christ. Facilitated by Marc Fey, the session forms part of a larger series exploring three pivotal questions—Does God exist? Is the Bible reliable? Who is Jesus?—with a practical aim. Tackett frames the discussion under “Neighborly Apologetics,” urging believers to fulfill the royal law of loving their neighbors (James 2:8). By building trusted relationships, Christians can gently address doubts like those of a hypothetical “Mrs. Smith” who questions whether Jesus truly died. The webinar does not merely present facts; it equips families to engage skeptics while recognizing that resistance often stems from the heart rather than the head.

Tackett opens by greeting participants and expressing gratitude for their time. He reminds listeners that the evening's focus—Christ's death—is too vast for one session, so resurrection will follow later. He identifies two dominant contrary theories: the swoon theory (Jesus survived crucifixion in a coma and revived) and the substitution theory (someone else died in His place). These, he argues, underpin most objections to the biblical account. Before diving in, Tackett lays groundwork through historical documents, Roman execution practices, evidence of death, common-sense analysis, and ethical implications. A recent British survey showing 22 percent of respondents view Jesus as myth underscores the urgency: many neighbors may hold similar views, making preparation essential.

Historical evidence for Jesus' existence and death is abundant. Non-Christian sources provide striking corroboration. Tacitus records that Jesus “suffered the extreme penalty” under Tiberius at the hands of Pontius Pilate. Josephus identifies James as “the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ.” Other references appear in Pliny the Younger, Celsus (who disliked Jesus but never denied His existence), the Jewish Talmud (noting Jesus was hanged on a tree on Passover eve), Lucian, Mara bar Serapion, Justin Martyr, and Phlegon (who mentions the earthquake and darkness). These extra-biblical attestations build a “deeply impressive” case for both Jesus' life and crucifixion.

The Gospels and New Testament writings supply the most compelling testimony. All four Gospels affirm Jesus' death: Matthew and John state He “gave up His spirit”; Mark and Luke record that He “breathed His last.” Paul, initially hostile, converted dramatically and consulted eyewitnesses Peter and James. His letters, along with those of Peter, Jude, and James, reinforce the account. Skeptics sometimes dismiss these as biased, but Tackett counters that rejecting all non-neutral sources would erase most ancient history. An early creed in 1 Corinthians 15—formed within years of the events, during the lifetime of eyewitnesses—declares: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures... He was buried... He was raised on the third day.” This creed alone undercuts claims

of myth or legend, which require centuries to develop.

Why, then, the persistent pushback? Tackett poses a telling question: societies, books, campus clubs, and annual media features obsessively debunk Jesus, yet no equivalent efforts target Plato, Aristotle, or even the sketchier King Arthur. He draws a parallel to Holocaust deniers, whose stance arises not from evidence but from an a priori desire despite overwhelming facts. Similarly, denying Jesus' death often masks a deeper need to reject the resurrection and its implications—namely, that Jesus paid the penalty for human sin. Debates frequently devolve into weak rebuttals or conspiracy theories, signaling heart-level resistance rather than intellectual rigor. Tackett urges prayer for neighbors' hearts: that God would open eyes, soften hearts, and enable trusting relationships, as seen in Rosaria Butterfield's story. Under-cutting the resurrection (apologetics' "grand jewel") often begins by denying death itself, as the Quran claims.

The narrative arc of Jesus' final week reveals deliberate divine purpose. After years of breathtaking miracles—healings, raising the dead, calming storms—and authoritative teaching that amazed crowds, disciples anticipated a triumphant Messiah who would overthrow oppression and restore Israel. Tackett uses a musical metaphor: joyous anticipation building toward a "Hallelujah chorus." Then Jesus abruptly shifts the tone to a somber dirge. He repeatedly predicts His betrayal, arrest, denial, trial, mocking, flogging, crucifixion, and resurrection (Matthew 16, 17, 20, 26). Peter's rebuke—"This shall never happen to you"—earns Jesus' sharp reply: "Get behind me, Satan!" because Peter was minding human things, not God's. The disciples were "greatly distressed." Yet Jesus allowed events to unfold: Judas' betrayal for thirty pieces of silver after the Bethany anointing, arrest in Gethsemane (where Jesus healed the servant's ear and voluntarily submitted, declaring "I am"), denial by Peter and abandonment by all, trials before Annas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, and finally Pilate.

Pilate sensed jealousy at work, received his wife's warning dream, offered release, but yielded to the mob's cries of "Crucify Him!" after washing his hands. The historical documents lead unmistakably to crucifixion ordered by Pilate.

Understanding Roman crucifixion is essential. Invented by Persians and perfected by Romans around 300 BC, it executed thousands—possibly hundreds of thousands—as a public deterrent. The word "excruciating" derives from "out of the cross." Scourging alone was horrific: a whip with embedded metal or bone tore flesh, exposing veins, muscles, and entrails, as described by Eusebius. Isaiah 52–53 foretold this disfigurement. Victims carried the crossbeam to Golgotha, were stripped, nailed through wrists and feet, and raised naked before elements, birds, and insects. Cicero called it "the cruelest and most disgusting penalty"; Josephus, "the most pitiable of deaths." Death came slowly through suffocation as the body sagged, relieved only by pushing up on nailed feet, compounded by trauma.

Medical evidence confirms Jesus died. After scourging left Him near death, soldiers broke legs of other victims to hasten asphyxiation before Sabbath—but not Jesus'. Seeing He was already dead, they pierced His side with a spear; blood and water flowed, indicating a pierced heart and coagulation. Professional executioners confirmed death. Louis Lapidès notes Jesus was dying en route to the cross; Romans did not resuscitate. Jewish burial customs—wrapping with seventy-five pounds of spices, sealing in a tomb—would be unthinkable for a living man. Gospels record Jesus' final words: "It is finished," "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

Scholarly consensus is overwhelming. Gary Habermas cites skeptics John Dominic Crossan and

Marcus Borg: Jesus' death by crucifixion is "as strong as any fact in the ancient world." Bart Ehrman lists eleven independent ancient sources, some from the early 30s AD, calling the evidence "way more than we need." Even atheist scholars like Derek Ludeman deem it indisputable, corroborated by Josephus, Tacitus, and the Talmud. Questioners are typically non-specialists seeking attention.

Common sense devastates contrary theories. Surviving scourging, crucifixion, spear to the heart, mummification-like wrapping, a sealed guarded tomb, then reviving and escaping defies logic—like claiming Ted Bundy survived the electric chair. Pilate verified death via centurion. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus handled the body as rigor mortis set in. Supernatural signs—darkness, earthquake, torn veil, opened tombs—accompanied the death; the centurion declared, "Surely He was the Son of God."

The swoon theory requires Jesus to be a liar who deceived Mary Magdalene, the women, Peter, James, and five hundred others by claiming resurrection instead of admitting a coma. It contradicts His lifelong truthfulness. The substitution theory (some claim another died in Jesus' place) collapses under scrutiny: constant guard after trial made swapping impossible; Mary would recognize her son's voice and form. These theories expose heart issues—a cultural desire for self-lordship ("homo deus") rather than submitting to Christ—rather than evidential weakness. Tackett advises responding with grace and wisdom.

Theologically, Jesus' death was no mere execution. It fulfilled the mission to give His life as ransom (Matthew 20:28). On the cross, He bore sin's penalty—separation from God—crying, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" This agony, anticipated in Gethsemane, dwarfed physical pain. "It is finished" (Greek **telestai**) meant "paid in full." Isaiah 53 declares He was pierced for transgressions, crushed for iniquities; by His wounds we are healed. Without this death, there is no forgiveness, reconciliation, or salvation.

Disciples were devastated. The promised Messiah lay betrayed, tried, scourged, crucified, and sealed in a tomb. It appeared all was lost. Tackett invites listeners to reflect in their place before the next session on the resurrection—the true "Hallelujah chorus."

Marc Fey closed by thanking Tackett, noting recordings would be shared via email and [deltackett.com](http://deltackett.com). Tackett's final prayer thanked God for demonstrating love through the cross as propitiation for sins and asked the Spirit to open hearts for neighbors.

In just over an hour, Tackett delivers far more than apologetics facts. He weaves history, medicine, scholarship, and theology into a compelling case that Jesus truly died—intentionally, substitutionarily, victoriously. For believers, the session deepens gratitude; for skeptics, it challenges assumptions; for neighbors, it models relational witness. The death of Christ stands as history's most attested and consequential event, inviting all to ponder its eternal ramifications. As Tackett reminds us, the cross was never the end—only the necessary prelude to resurrection hope.

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### Did Jesus Really Die? Evidence from Del Tackett's Neighborly Apologetics

(Thumbnail Sketch from Del Tackett's Webinar, [August 8, 2023](#))

In his August 8, 2023 Neighborly Apologetics webinar, Del Tackett tackles a foundational yet contested question: Did Jesus truly die? Part of a series exploring “Who is Jesus?”, the session equips Christians to engage neighbors with doubts, fulfilling the royal law to love others (James 2:8). Tackett focuses on two main objections—the swoon theory (Jesus survived in a coma) and substitution theory (someone else died in His place)—while building a robust case from history, medicine, and theology.

Extra-biblical sources strongly affirm Jesus' crucifixion. Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud, and others record His execution under Pontius Pilate. The Gospels unanimously declare He “gave up His spirit” and “breathed His last.” An early creed in 1 Corinthians 15, formed within years of the events, states Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose—too soon for legend to develop.

Roman crucifixion was brutally efficient. After horrific scourging that tore flesh to the bone, Jesus was nailed to the cross, where suffocation and trauma ensured death. Soldiers confirmed it by piercing His side; blood and water flowed. Pilate verified via centurion. Joseph and Nicodemus prepared the body with 75 pounds of spices as rigor mortis set in. Supernatural signs—darkness, earthquake, torn veil—accompanied the death.

Scholars across the spectrum, including skeptics like Bart Ehrman and atheist Derek Ludeman, call Jesus' death by crucifixion indisputable, supported by at least eleven ancient sources. Common sense dismantles contrary theories: surviving scourging, nailing, spearing, and burial only to revive is implausible. The swoon theory makes Jesus a liar who deceived His followers about resurrection. Substitution fails under constant guard and Mary's presence at the cross.

Theologically, Jesus' death paid sin's penalty—separation from God—fulfilling “It is finished” (**telestai**, paid in full). Without it, there is no forgiveness or salvation. Tackett urges heart-focused prayer for neighbors, recognizing resistance often stems from a desire for self-lordship rather than evidence.

Far more than historical fact, Christ's death offers eternal hope, paving the way for the resurrection.

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