

“FAITH STRENGTHENING FACTS”

Josh Gebhardt

Often times at the beginning of a New Year people set fitness goals. Most want to lose weight and get stronger. As the first month of 2022 draws to a close, we'd like to offer you something that has the potential to strengthen something else....your faith. The following are faith-strengthening facts that we'd like to share.

Fact 1: The veracity of scripture

There are two tests that scholars use to determine an ancient document's reliability. One is the number of ancient manuscripts that still exist. The other is measuring the date of the manuscripts compared to the date of the original. Without boring you with numbers it is safe to say that the Bible dwarfs the competition in both of these categories. Famous historical works by men like Aristotle and Homer don't even come close to the New Testament's reliability when evaluated by these methods. The Bible is the most bibliographic supported ancient document in the world. What does this all mean? If you can't trust the Bible, then you can't really trust any ancient document taught about in our history books.

Fact 2: The empty tomb

The resurrection is the lynchpin that Christianity hangs on. It proves that Jesus was exactly who He claimed to be. Does history agree with the claims of the Bible?

Virtually all serious scholars of antiquity agree that the crucifixion of Jesus is a historical certainty. History also tells us that His tomb was found empty on the third day. Skeptics often dismiss this fact as evidence of the resurrection. Today we'll explore the possible explanations for the empty tomb to determine if the resurrection is a belief based on fact or mere wishful thinking.

The first possible explanation of the empty tomb is a theory which proposes that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but instead just passed out or appeared to die and then walked out of the tomb on the third day. Does this theory hold water?

Considering the fact that Rome had execution by crucifixion down to a science, and that it was performed by soldiers who were experts in the craft, it seems rather unlikely that Jesus somehow survived. Throw in the fact Jesus suffered a worse punishment than most, having been flogged beforehand, and this scenario gets even more far-fetched. They even thrust a spear into his side when they were finished with their work. Those who hold to this explanation also need to find a way to explain how Jesus was able to then survive alone in a dark tomb without medical attention, and walk out in good health on the third day. To say this theory is a reach is being generous.

The second theory claims the disciples stole the body. The Bible tells us that Jewish leadership made this very claim. But is it really plausible? The tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers. The disciples were afraid and many of them were in hiding. How would they have even been able to perform such a task? And if they did would they really have been willing to go to their deaths in the following years for their belief in the resurrection if they knew it was a hoax? Even many of today's scholars have abandoned this explanation.

The third most popular explanation for the empty tomb is known as the wrong tomb theory. This theory claims the women followers of Jesus who discovered the empty tomb simply went to the wrong location. However, if this was the case then why did the Jewish leaders claim the body was stolen? Why didn't they just go to the correct tomb and produce the body of Jesus to ensure the Christian movement they put so much effort into stopping was crushed? This theory has very little support by anyone.

So what does all of this mean? It means that the supernatural claim that Jesus rose in bodily form on the third day is literally the best and most likely explanation for the empty tomb!

Fact 3: Witnesses of the risen Savior

Evidence for the resurrection doesn't end with debunking alternate theories for the empty tomb. In fact, the evidence gets even stronger as we dive into eyewitness accounts of our risen savior.

Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee. He had wealth. He had status. He even had a position of power that allowed him to passionately persecute Christians and he worked to end Christianity. Then, suddenly something changed. This powerful man gave up his position of power and stopped persecuting Christians. He not only left those things behind, but he became a Christian himself. Saul, now known as Paul, even went on to become one of the faith's most outspoken proponents! What led to this dramatic transition? Paul claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus. From a worldly perspective Paul gave up comfort, wealth, power, and status in exchange for imprisonments, beatings, suffering, and ultimately execution. Does it make any sense that Paul would do all of this for the sake of a lie? Of course not! Paul also recorded that the risen Jesus had appeared to over 500 witnesses at once in 1 Corinthians. In his writing he specified that many of said witnesses were still alive at the time of his letter, which was likely a challenge to the readers to go and ask those witnesses for themselves.

The evidence doesn't stop there. Consider James, the half-brother of Jesus. James did not buy into the claims Jesus made prior to the crucifixion. However, afterwards he became the leader of the Jerusalem church and was stoned to death for His belief in Jesus. What could cause such a change of heart? A change of heart that resulted in a skeptic going to his death for his faith in Jesus? We're told in 1 Corinthians. James saw the risen Jesus.

Fact 4: The Apostles deaths

History and church tradition tells us that all of the apostles, with the exception of John who spent his last days in exile, died the death of martyrs. Many people have died for false religions that they believed to be true. However, the apostles were in a unique position regarding their faith. They would have known if it were the truth or if it was a lie which they had told. Few people are willing to die for what they know is a lie...especially if said lie doesn't gain them wealth and power. Fewer still are willing to die gruesome deaths for what they know is a lie. Yet the apostles, most of whom were terrified and went into hiding when Jesus was crucified,

willingly went to their deaths proclaiming the gospel. What could have caused such a dramatic transformation in these men? They saw the resurrected Jesus. They knew the gospel was true, and they were willing to die for it.

Closing:

Our hope is that these facts have not only strengthened your faith, but will also equip you to help convince those who are hesitant to accept the truth of the Bible. However, while these facts may come in handy when trying to show them the truth, please don't forget to share with them the best news in all the world...the gospel. Tell them how we all have sinned, and that the penalty for sin is Hell. Explain to them that, despite all of the human reasoning and teachings that say otherwise...good works and religion cannot and will not pay for the penalty for their sin and save them from that dreadful place. Then declare to them that God loved them so much that He sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who had no sin of His own to pay for; So that He could pay the penalty for all the sins of the whole world, theirs included!, by shedding His blood and dying on the cross. Then tell them about how Jesus was buried, but rose again on the third day, and offers us forgiveness of sin and eternal life as a free gift. Share how they can receive this amazing gift. Tell them it ISN'T by stopping bad behavior and instead being good. It ISN'T by self-improvement, or church attendance, or religious rituals. No, there is only one condition...faith in Jesus. Joyfully tell them that God made the way to Heaven by grace through faith. Because there is nothing we can do to save ourselves or earn favor with God, Jesus became flesh and did all the work to save us Himself. Salvation doesn't come by being better or by working harder, but simply by trusting in the one who did all of the saving work for us. Urge them to place their faith in Jesus alone and receive the free gift of eternal life.

Those Serving Us:

Greeters: All Youth

Acolyte: Heather Wapplehurst

Call to Worship: All youth sing "Sanctuary"

Praise Songs: "Lord I Life Your Name on High" "I Will Call Upon the Lord"

Children's Time: Gwen Ruth

Ushers for Offering: All youth/Noisy can

Offertory Prayer: Maddy Ridge

Message: Faith Strengthening Facts (Multiple Youth)

Praise Songs: "Build Your Kingdom Here" "We Believe"

Pastoral Prayer & Lord's Prayer: Chris Wappelhorst

Benediction: Caroline Sheldon

Offertory Prayer (Maddy Ridge)

Heavenly Father, you are a gracious and generous God. Please remind us to appreciate your constant provision for our lives, and help us to live in such a way that we are not taking it for granted. Help us to be giving. As you are giving. Please bless these tithes and these offerings. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen

God's Word (Ryan Ruth) 1 Peter 3:13-16 (NKJV)

13 And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled." 15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

(Chris Wappelhorst)

Heavenly Father,

Help us to always keep our feet firmly grounded on your truth, and to keep our hearts full of your love. Please help your truth and your love to spill out of us so that the lost world may hear it and believe. Remind us that serving you is a means of loving you. Please move us to reach others with the gospel, and please bless us with the skills and the knowledge to serve you effectively.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever
Amen

Benediction (Caroline Sheldon)

Go today, knowing that your faith is not built on a manmade myth or a nice sounding story. Your faith is built on the one who said He was the WAY the TRUTH and the LIFE, Jesus, and that TRUTH is verifiable. Your faith is not something that asks you to ignore the facts of history, but instead something that embraces them. With that knowledge go and confidently share the gospel with joy.