

# The Death of the Twelve Apostles

How their martyrdom evidences Easter

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*with discussion questions*

I have an interest in the death of the Apostles. We all should. Every Christian should spend some time looking into the historical records. There are many legends concerning their deaths which makes the historical evidence hard to interpret. Many times the accounts conflict with one another. Most early Christians wanted their home to be crowned with the stature of having been the final resting place of one of the twelve. It is probably for this reason that there were embellishments forged.

Sifting through the wheat and the chaff is not easy task. The martyrdom of some of the Apostles is more certain than others. Historians will have different degrees of certainty concerning the circumstances of their deaths. For instance, unbiased historians will not take issue with the historical credibility of the martyrdom of Peter, Paul, and James the Apostle. Many of the other accounts have decent historic validity as well. Some accounts, however, raise the eyebrow and cause us to remain agnostic.



However, when boiled down to their least common denominator, it is very feasible to believe that all but one of the Apostles suffered and died a martyr's death, even if we can't be sure of the exact details.

Amidst some uncertainty, one thing is clear—the reason given for their death was the same in *all* accounts. They were killed because they proclaimed to have seen Christ die and then to have seen Him alive. They all died because of an unwavering, unrelenting claim that Christ rose from the grave. They died for Easter.

Personally, in my mind, the gruesome death of the Apostles as recorded below was one of the greatest gifts that God ever gave to the Church. It contributes much to Christian apologetics by answering the "how do you know?" question concerning the resurrection of Christ.

The following is my attempt to take the best of all the sources and share the most likely scenario for each Apostle's death. At the risk of spoiling some of the "legends," I have given each account a grade of probability from A (highest probability) to D (lowest probability).

Read through the accounts of their deaths. Use it this Easter. Tell your children. This may sound odd, but in a very real sense, I thank God for bringing about the Apostles' deaths, for in their deaths they sealed their testimony in blood making our faith in the risen Christ built upon a solid foundation.

### **(1) The Apostle James**

James, the Apostle of the Lord, was the second recorded martyr after Christ's death (Stephen was the first). His death is recorded in Acts 12:2 where it is told that Herod Agrippa killed him with a sword. Clemens Alexandrinus and Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History II.2) both tell how the executioner witnessed the courage and un-recanting spirit of James and was then convinced of Christ resurrection and was executed along with James.

Date of Martyrdom: 44-45 A.D.

Probability rating: A for the death of James, C- for the death of the executioner

### **(2) The Apostle Peter**

Although, just before the crucifixion, Peter denied three times that he even knew Christ, after the resurrection he did not do so again. Peter, just as Jesus told him in John 21:18-19, was crucified by Roman executioners because he could not deny his master again. According to Eusebius, he thought himself unworthy to be crucified as his Master, and, therefore, he asked to be crucified "head downward."

Date of Martyrdom: ca. 64 A.D.

Probability rating: A

### **(3) The Apostle Andrew**

Andrew, who introduced his brother Peter to Christ, went to join Peter with Christ in eternity six years after Peter's death. After preaching Christ's resurrection to the Scythians and Thracians, he too was crucified for his faith. As Hippolytus tells us, Andrew was hanged on an olive tree at Patrae, a town in Achaia.

Date of Martyrdom: 70 A.D.

Probability rating: B

### **(4) The Apostle Thomas**

Thomas is known as "doubting Thomas" because of his reluctance to believe the other Apostles' witness of the resurrection. After they told him that Christ was alive, he stated "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). After this, Christ did appear to him and Thomas believed unto death. Thomas sealed his testimony as he was thrust through with pine spears, tormented with red-hot plates, and burned alive.

Date of Martyrdom: 70 A.D.

Probability rating: B concerning his martyrdom, D concerning the exact method of execution.

### **(5) The Apostle Philip**

Philip was corrected by Christ when he asked Christ to "show us the Father, then this will be enough for us" (John 14:8). Christ responded, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9). Philip later saw the glory of Christ after the resurrection and undoubtedly reflected with amazement on Christ's response to his request. Philip evangelized in Phrygia where hostile Jews had him tortured and then crucified.

Date of Martyrdom: 54 A.D.

Probability rating: C

### **(6) The Apostle Matthew**

Matthew, the tax collector, so desperately wanted the Jews to accept Christ. He wrote The Gospel According to Matthew about ten years before his death. Because of this, one can see, contained within his Gospel, the faith for which he spilled his blood. Matthew surely remembered his resurrected Savior's words, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:20), when he professed the resurrected Christ unto his death by beheading at Nad-Davar.

Date of Martyrdom: 60-70 A.D.

Probability rating: B

### **(7) The Apostle Nathanael (Bartholomew)**

Nathanael, whose name means "gift of God" was truly given as a gift to the Church through his martyrdom. Nathanael was the first to profess, early in Christ's ministry, that Christ was the Son of God (John 1:49). He later paid for this profession through a hideous death. Unwilling to recant of his proclamation of a risen Christ, he was flayed and then crucified.

Date of Martyrdom: 70 A.D.

Probability rating: C

### **(8) The Apostle James the Lesser**

James was appointed to be the head of the Jerusalem church for many years after Christ's death. In this, he undoubtedly came in contact with many hostile Jews (the same ones who killed Christ and stated "His [Christ's] blood be on us and our children" (Matt. 27:25)). In order to make James deny Christ's resurrection, these men positioned him at the top of the Temple for all to see and hear. James, unwilling to deny what he knew to be true, was cast down from the Temple and finally beaten to death with a fuller's club to the head.

Date of Martyrdom: 63 A.D.

Probability rating: B that he was cast down from the temple, D that he was being beaten to death with fuller's club after the fall

### **(9) The Apostle Simon the Zealot**

Simon was a Jewish zealot who strived to set his people free from Roman oppression. After he saw with his own eyes that Christ had been resurrected, he became a zealot of the Gospel. Historians tell of the many different places that Simon proclaimed the good news of Christ's resurrection: Egypt, Cyrene, Africa, Mauritania, Britain, Lybia, and Persia. His rest finally came when he verified his testimony and went to be with Christ, being crucified by a governor in Syria.

Date of Martyrdom: 74 A.D.

Probability rating: B

### **(10) The Apostle Judas Thaddeus**

Judas questioned the Lord: "Judas said to him (not Iscariot), Lord, how is it that you will show yourself to us, and not unto the world?" (John 14:22). After he witnessed Christ's resurrection, Judas then knew the answer to his question. Preaching the risen Christ to those in Mesopotamia in the midst of pagan priests, Judas was beaten to death with sticks, showing to the world that Christ was indeed Lord and God.

Date of Martyrdom: 72 A.D.

Probability rating: C

### **(11) The Apostle Matthias**

Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot (the betrayer of Christ who hanged himself) as the twelfth Apostle of Christ (Acts 1:26). It is believed by most that Matthias was one of the seventy that

Christ sent out during his earthly ministry (Luke 10:1). This qualifies him to be an apostle. Matthias, of which the least is known, is said by Eusebius to have preached in Ethiopia. He was later stoned while hanging upon a cross.

Date of Martyrdom: 70 A.D.

Probability rating: D

## **(12) The Apostle John**

John is the only one of the twelve Apostles to have died a natural death. Although he did not die a martyr's death, he did live a martyr's life. He was exiled to the Island of Patmos under the Emperor Domitian for his proclamation of the risen Christ. It was there that he wrote the last book in the Bible, Revelation. Some traditions tell us that he was thrown into boiling oil before the Latin Gate, where he was not killed but undoubtedly scarred for the rest of his life.

Date of Martyrdom: 95 A.D.

Probability rating: A that he was not martyred, C that he was thrown into boiling oil

## **(13) The Apostle Paul**

Paul, himself a persecutor of the Christian faith (Galatians 1:13), was brought to repentance on his way to Damascus by an appearance of the risen Christ. Ironically, Paul was heading for Damascus to arrest those who held to Christ's resurrection. Paul was the greatest skeptic there was until he saw the truth of the resurrection. He then devoted his life to the proclamation of the living Christ. Writing to the Corinthians, defending his ministry, Paul tells of his sufferings for the name of Christ: "In labors more abundant, in beatings above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once was I stoned, three times I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeys often, in storms on the water, in danger of robbers, in danger by mine own countrymen, in danger by the heathen, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in the sea, among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Finally, Paul met his death at the hands of the Roman Emperor Nero when he was beheaded in Rome.

Date of Martyrdom: ca. 67 A.D.

Probability rating: A

### **An Afterthought:**

I believe that the deaths of the Apostles increase the certainty level of the historicity of the resurrection to a level that is beyond excuse for disbelief. People do not die for their own lies, half-truths, or fabrications. If the Apostles truly died proclaiming to have seen Christ dead then

alive and ascend into heaven, Christ is who He said He was, God incarnate who came to take away the sins of the world.

## **An Objection:**

However, some might object to my reasoning. *You* may object to my reasoning. The question that gives rise to the objection is this: Don't many people die for something they believe? Does this mean that if you die for something, it is true? To be sure, many people have died for something that they believed and this does not make it true. The 9-11 bombers believed something and died for that belief, but their deaths do not give credence to the validity of their beliefs in any way. There is a big difference in dying for something that you believe having received the basis for that belief from someone else and dying for something that you believe because *you* witnessed the events that establish the belief.

From a historical stand point, the difference is as great as day and night. The suicide bombers and others who die for their faith are dying for something that they believe because they have heard it from someone else. This adds no valid verification to what they believe from an standpoint of evidence or reason. It would be like me dying for *my* faith in Christ's resurrection. All that this would prove is that *I* truly did believe that Christ rose from the grave, but it would not verify in any way that He *actually did* rise from the grave. Why? Because I did not see it. I was not a first hand witness.

Now if I died a martyr's death saying that *I* saw Christ die and rise from the grave with *my own* eyes that would be a different story. Why? Because it would not verify a belief handed down from someone else, but a belief in something that I witnessed firsthand. At this point, you have only three options for explaining the Apostles' belief: 1) Say that they died for a lie knowing that it was a lie, 2) that they were delusional or crazy, or 3) that was the truth, Christ did rise from the grave.

To say that they died knowing it was a lie places a great burden of proof upon the proponent of this view and completely lacks in any historical credibility (no matter how many attempts have been made to substantiate such). It would take a much greater leap of faith to believe this than to believe that they were telling the truth and Christ actually rose. Remember, [the possibility of an alternative does not amount to probability.](#)

To opt for number two and say that they were crazy suffers from the same fate as the first. There is no way to substantiate this. There is absolutely no historical evidence in favor of this supposed insanity for even a single Apostle, much less all of them. From a historical standpoint, this would most certainly be a greater leap of faith than to believe that they were telling the truth.

The only option is the last---that Christ did raise from the grave and He is who he said he was. All others are blind leaps into the dark.

The motives for these blind leaps are many I am sure, but let me mention a couple of the most likely.

People who deny this evidence are sometimes motivated by an anti-supernatural bias. This bias starts with the assumption that Christ did not rise from the grave because it is impossible for people to rise from the grave. But this argument is completely unsustainable since it begs the question. It may be true that people don't *normally* rise from the grave, but simply because you do not have personal empirical evidence of its possibility does not make it impossible objectively. I do however understand this bias. I think that it is foolish to uncritically and characteristically accept stories of happenings that fall outside of our God-given means of empirically acquiring information. But belief in the resurrection of Christ, as I have been arguing, is not in any way an uncritical belief (at least it does not have to be). The evidence *compels* us to adjust our bias at this point.

Another motive that people have for rejecting the evidence is less intellectual and more emotional. Many people have an emotional bias against the very idea of God. This emotional bias, practically speaking, comes to us from a variety of avenues. For some, it is their upbringing. They have a commitment to that which they were taught. We all want mom and dad to be right and we will do everything in our power to cheer for their beliefs. Why? Because they become *our* beliefs and we have a lot invested in them. For many, if Christ rose from the grave, then they, their family, their religion, and all their friends are wrong. This is sometimes too much to handle emotionally.

For others, the emotional objection comes from a jilted experience. They have called upon God to save them from sickness. They have looked for His mercy in their family. They have prayed for their basic needs and He, in their estimation, has not answered. Therefore, they are apathetic to the evidence of the resurrection, being guided by their emotional experiences and longings. Both of these emotional objections to the resurrection are understandable.

I know that emotion unbridled is a much more powerful source for belief than the cold facts of the intellectual realm. But, at the same time, while the objections are understandable, they should not be not admissible or sustainable. We cannot let emotions rule our belief system. We must be ready to look past our experience and our traditions so that we can see the truth. Once we do, then the truth can take the hand of our emotions and train them properly.

In sum concerning the initial objection, the 9-11 suicide bombers may have sincerely believed their religion, but their conviction carries no inherent verification. All we know is that they were sincere in their belief. The disciples, on the other hand, died for something that they claimed to have witnessed firsthand. This carries no "hearsay" but firsthand testimony. It is a completely different story.

Therefore, the objection, while understandable at first glance, really must be dismissed as an irrelevant and false comparison. Here are your three options concerning the Apostles:

1. They died for a lie and knew it (unsustainable do to lack of any reasonable motive).
2. They were all delusional and crazy (but this would take more faith than *any* option since you would have to explain how they all had the same delusion and craziness—many being at different places and different times).
3. What they said was true. Christ did rise from the grave and is who He said He was.

To conclude, I want you to listen to the words of Ignatius, a second century church Father who's beliefs were sustained by the reasoning of my current argument concerning the Apostles' deaths.

“Mindful of him, do ye by all means know that Jesus the Lord was truly born of Mary, being made of a woman; and was as truly crucified. For, says he, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of the Lord Jesus."11 And He really suffered, and died, and rose again. For says [Paul], "If Christ should become passible, and should be the first to rise again from the dead.12 And again, In that He died, He died unto sin once: but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God.13 Otherwise, what advantage would there be in [becoming subject to] bonds, if Christ has not died? what advantage in patience? what advantage in [enduring] stripes? And why such facts as the following: Peter was crucified; Paul and James were slain with the sword; John was banished to Patmos; Stephen was stoned to death by the Jews who killed the Lord? But, [in truth,] none of these sufferings were in vain; for the Lord was really crucified by the ungodly.” (Ignatius: *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Tarsians*, III)

Happy Easter—celebrate the resurrection and proclaim the kingdom!

The evidence is there. Do you believe? . . .

## Discussion Questions:

1. It was said in the article that we can thank God for the death of the Apostles. Why would we be compelled to do such a thing?
2. If the Apostles had recanted their faith in order to save their lives, how would things possibly be different?
3. It was said that one cannot compare the deaths of the 9-11 hijackers and their religious convictions to that of the Apostles. Summarize the difference.
4. If one were to die for something that they said they saw, this adds credibility to their testimony, no matter how extraordinary. Give a modern-day example of some *extraordinary* claim that would parallel the death of the Apostles. It does not have to be real; be creative.
5. All of the Apostles were God honoring men. While they were sinners in need of God mercy, they followed Christ as much as anyone. Why do you think God allowed such suffering in their lives?
6. Do you think that the Apostles had any idea that Christians would be referring back to the gruesome circumstances of their deaths 2000 years later? Explain.
7. Read Roman 8:28. Considering the suffering of the Apostles, what does this tell you about God's purpose for suffering and how does it give you hope in your own suffering?