

The Historical Jesus

A 15-minute class summary — Pleasant Springs Church, Discipleship School

Full six-week series: ps-church.com/discipleship/historical-jesus

Before you start — notes for the teacher (*not read aloud*)

Timing. About **15 minutes** at a normal teaching pace. The bracketed times are cumulative. The **[10:00] archaeology section is optional** — dropping it brings you to about 13 minutes and costs nothing the rest of the lesson depends on. **Never cut the last section.**

Who is in the room. Assume at least one person present has been told by someone they love that this is all made up, and has had no answer. This lesson is for them. Assume also that someone is there because they are genuinely unsure — **do not perform certainty you have not earned.**

The one rule this lesson keeps. We claim only what the evidence carries. When a point is disputed or thin, **say so out loud.** Overstating the case never serves the truth, and a class that catches you overstating one thing will disbelieve the rest.

What this lesson is not. It is not proof that Jesus is Lord. History can get you to an empty tomb and a group of people who died saying they saw him. **It cannot get you to worship.** That last step is faith, and the closing section says so plainly rather than blurring the line.

Scripture. All English, ESV. The Greek is on the website if anyone wants it.

Time of day. The script is deliberately time-neutral — no "tonight" or "this morning" — so it reads correctly whichever service it is taught in.

THE SCRIPT

[0:00] Open — the question under the question

Somebody you love has probably said it to you. Maybe over a holiday table, maybe in a text message: *"You know none of that actually happened, right?"*

And a lot of Christians have no answer. Not because there isn't one — **because nobody ever showed them there was one.**

So for fifteen minutes I want to do something unusual in a church class. **I am going to argue like a historian, not like a preacher.** No appeals to "the Bible says so." We are going to ask what can be

established about Jesus of Nazareth using the same tools you would use on Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great — and I will tell you honestly where the evidence is strong and where it is thin.

This is the six-week series compressed. I will tell you where to find the whole thing at the end.

[1:30] Did he exist at all?

Start at the bottom. Not "was he the Son of God" — **did the man exist.**

Here is what surprises people. The claim that Jesus never lived is not a position held by skeptical scholars. **It is a position skeptical scholars reject.**

Rudolf Bultmann spent his whole career arguing we can know very little about Jesus — he is about as skeptical as New Testament scholarship gets. And even he wrote: **"By no means are we at the mercy of those who doubt or deny that Jesus ever lived."**

When the demythologizers say the question is settled, **we are not standing on contested ground.**

And notice how one of our sources actually opens. Luke does not begin "once upon a time." He begins like a man filing a report:

Luke 1:1–4 (ESV) — "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were **eyewitnesses** and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an **orderly account** for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have **certainty** concerning the things you have been taught."

Eyewitnesses. Followed closely. Orderly account. Certainty. **That is not the vocabulary of myth.**

[3:30] The evidence is older than the books

Here is the thing most people have never been told, and it is the strongest card we hold.

The Gospels are not our earliest evidence. Before a single Gospel was written down, Christians were already reciting short, rhythmic, memorized summaries of what they believed. You can still see them embedded in Paul's letters — the wording is older than the letter carrying it.

The most important one is this, and Paul says plainly that he is passing on something he *received*:

1 Corinthians 15:3–6 (ESV) — "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to **more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive**, though some have fallen asleep."

Most of whom are still alive. That is not a devotional flourish. **That is an invitation to go and check.** You do not write that about people who cannot be found.

And the dating is the whole game. Paul writes this in the mid-50s, but the formula he is quoting is older — scholars trace it back to within a **few years** of the crucifixion. **AD 30 to 35.**

⚠ Think about what that does to the legend theory. Legends need time and distance. This has neither. It is in Jerusalem, within a few years, naming men you could walk up to.

[6:00] What even skeptics grant

So when critical scholars treat the New Testament as nothing more than ancient literature, where do they land?

There is a short list of facts that **virtually everyone who studies this accepts**, whatever they believe about God. Not "Christians believe." **Historians grant.**

1. Jesus **died by crucifixion.**
2. His disciples were **driven to despair.**
3. They soon had experiences they **believed were appearances of the risen Jesus.**
4. They were **transformed** from frightened doubters into public proclaimers — in **Jerusalem**, the one city where the claim was easiest to disprove.
5. **James, the brother of Jesus** — a skeptic during the ministry — was converted.
6. **Paul, the persecutor**, was converted.

⚠ One honest note. The **empty tomb** is held by many scholars but less universally than the rest, so I am listing it separately rather than smuggling it in.

Those two conversions are worth stopping on. John tells us flatly that Jesus' own brothers did not believe in him:

John 7:5 (ESV) — "For not even his brothers believed in him."

And then James is leading the Jerusalem church and dies for it. The historian Reginald Fuller put it this way: even if no appearance to James had ever been recorded, **"we should have to invent one"** to explain what happened to him.

Something turned a skeptical brother into a martyr. **The sources name it.**

[8:00] The witnesses who had nothing to gain

Now step outside the Bible entirely. Evidence is strongest from a witness who **gains nothing** — or loses something — by giving it.

Tacitus — Rome's greatest historian, writing around AD 115, explaining whom Nero blamed for the fire: "*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.*"

He calls the faith a "**mischievous superstition.**" Hear that. **No Christian invented that sentence.** And in the same breath he reports that the movement, checked by its leader's death, "*again broke out.*"

Then **Pliny the Younger**, governing a province in Asia Minor, writing to the Emperor Trajan in **AD 112** to ask how he should prosecute these people. He describes what they do when they meet:

"They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god."

⚠ **Sit with that.** A Roman governor, interrogating and executing Christians, writing to the emperor — and the detail he records is that **within a single lifetime of the crucifixion, they were worshipping Jesus as God.** He is not paying a compliment. He is filing a report.

Add **Josephus**, a Jewish historian in Roman pay. **Suetonius.** The **Talmud.** **Lucian**, a satirist who thought the whole thing was a joke.

⚠ And here I have to be honest with you about something the series says out loud: **one of the Josephus passages shows signs of later Christian editing.** Scholars debate how much. We are not going to pretend that is settled, and we do not need it to be.

You can assemble a basic life of Jesus from people who were not Christians and did not like Christians — that he lived, taught, was crucified under Pilate, and that his followers immediately began claiming and dying for his resurrection.

[10:00] The stones and the cross — (cut this section first if short on time)

Archaeology is a supporting witness here, not the star witness. But two things are worth knowing.

For nearly two thousand years, Roman crucifixion was known only from texts. Then in **June 1968**, a construction crew north of Jerusalem's Old Damascus Gate uncovered a burial site — and in it the bones of a man named **Yohanan**, about twenty-five years old, with a **seven-inch iron nail still driven through his heel bone.** His forearm bone was worn smooth, from pulling himself up to breathe.

The texts were describing something real.

And on the oldest skeptical theory — that Jesus survived the cross and revived in the tomb — the verdict is not from the church. **It came from David Strauss**, a skeptic who did not believe in the

resurrection at all. His point was simple: a man in that condition, half-dead, could not have convinced anyone he was **the risen Lord of life**. He would have needed a physician, not been worshipped.

The swoon theory was killed by an unbeliever.

[11:30] The tomb, and the explanations that fail

Two things need explaining: a tomb found empty, and a group of people convinced they had seen him alive.

And the very first counter-explanation on record is remarkable:

Matthew 28:13 (ESV) — "...and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'""

Stop and hear what that concedes. To argue that the body was *stolen* is to admit that the body was **gone**. The earliest hostile response to the resurrection is itself a hostile admission that the tomb was empty.

Every natural explanation has been tried. They died one at a time — mostly at the hands of the scholars who proposed them. Hallucination does not explain a group of five hundred, or an empty grave. Fraud does not explain men dying for something they knew they had faked. Legend does not explain a creed dated to within five years, in the city where it happened.

And Paul — who staked everything on it — refused to soften it:

1 Corinthians 15:17 (ESV) — "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."

⚠ **He gives you a way to falsify his own religion.** That is not what a con man writes.

[13:00] So what?

Let me be careful here, because this is where classes like this usually overreach.

One more piece, because people often assume the text itself is unreliable. **The New Testament is the best-attested book of antiquity.** There are over **five thousand** Greek manuscripts and portions of manuscripts. The majority of classical works survive in **fewer than twenty** — and in copies made seven hundred to fourteen hundred years after the fact. Of Livy's 142 books of history, 107 have simply vanished. **None of the New Testament has.**

Whatever you finally conclude about its message, you cannot dismiss it as a badly preserved text.

History cannot make you a Christian. It can bring you to a tomb that was empty, a creed too early to be legend, hostile witnesses who confirm the outline, and a group of people — including a skeptical

brother and a persecutor — who were changed in a way nobody has satisfactorily explained away.

It can bring you there. It cannot carry you over the line. That step is faith. And it is a step toward a person, not a proposition:

Romans 10:9 (ESV) — "...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Notice it runs **through the resurrection**. Not around it. The thing we have been weighing as history is the thing you are asked to trust.

So here is what I want you to take home. **You are not asked to believe against the evidence.** You have never been asked that. You are asked to take a step the evidence points toward but cannot take for you.

And the next time somebody you love says "*you know none of that really happened*" — **you have something to say now.** Say it gently. You are not trying to win.

1 Peter 3:15 (ESV) — "...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Gentleness and respect. That is in the same verse as the defense. It is not optional.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you that you did not ask us to believe in a fog. You acted in a real place, at a datable time, in front of witnesses who could be questioned. For honest doubters, give patience. For those of us who have been embarrassed into silence, give courage and gentleness both. And where the evidence has brought us as far as it can, give us faith to take the step it cannot take for us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

If you only remember three things

1. **The evidence is older than the books.** The creed in 1 Corinthians 15 dates to within a few years of the crucifixion — too early for legend, in the city where it happened.
 2. **The hostile witnesses help.** Tacitus called it a "mischievous superstition." The first counter-story was that the body was *stolen* — which concedes the tomb was empty.
 3. **History brings you to the line; faith crosses it.** Do not claim more than that — and do not claim less.
-

The full series — ps-church.com/discipleship/historical-jesus

Each week has the sources quoted in full, the Greek and the ESV side by side, and a downloadable PDF.

Week	What it covers
1 Did Jesus Even Live?	The myth theory, two centuries of the quest, and why no serious historian doubts it
2 The Earliest Witnesses	Creeds older than the Gospels, the 1 Corinthians 15 tradition, the minimal facts
3 Jesus Outside the Bible	Tacitus, Josephus, Pliny, Suetonius, the Talmud, Lucian — a life from outsiders
4 Stones, Bones, and the Cross	The census, Yohanan's heel bone, the Pilate inscription, and the swoon theory
5 The Empty Tomb and the Appearances	The evidence, and why every natural explanation has failed
6 So What? The Case Assembled	The case assembled, the miracle objection, and the response

The series engages **Gary Habermas**, ***The Historical Jesus*** and the "minimal facts" method.

Discussion starters — if you have time after

1. Has someone ever told you it was all made up? What did you say — and what do you wish you had said?
2. Why does the *date* of the 1 Corinthians 15 creed matter so much? What would change if it were a hundred years later?

3. Tacitus called Christianity a "mischievous superstition." Why is a hostile witness worth more than a friendly one?
4. We said history can bring you to the line but not across it. Does that feel like a weakness in the case, or an honest description of faith?
5. "Gentleness and respect" sits in the same verse as "make a defense." Which of the two do you find harder?

Pleasant Springs Church · 85 Bear Creek Road, Pinson, TN 38366 · (731) 307-3330 prayers@ps-church.com · ps-church.com *Community • Home • Unity • Relationship • Care • Hope*