

# *Because*

FOR ANYONE WHO'S EVER ASKED 'WHY?'

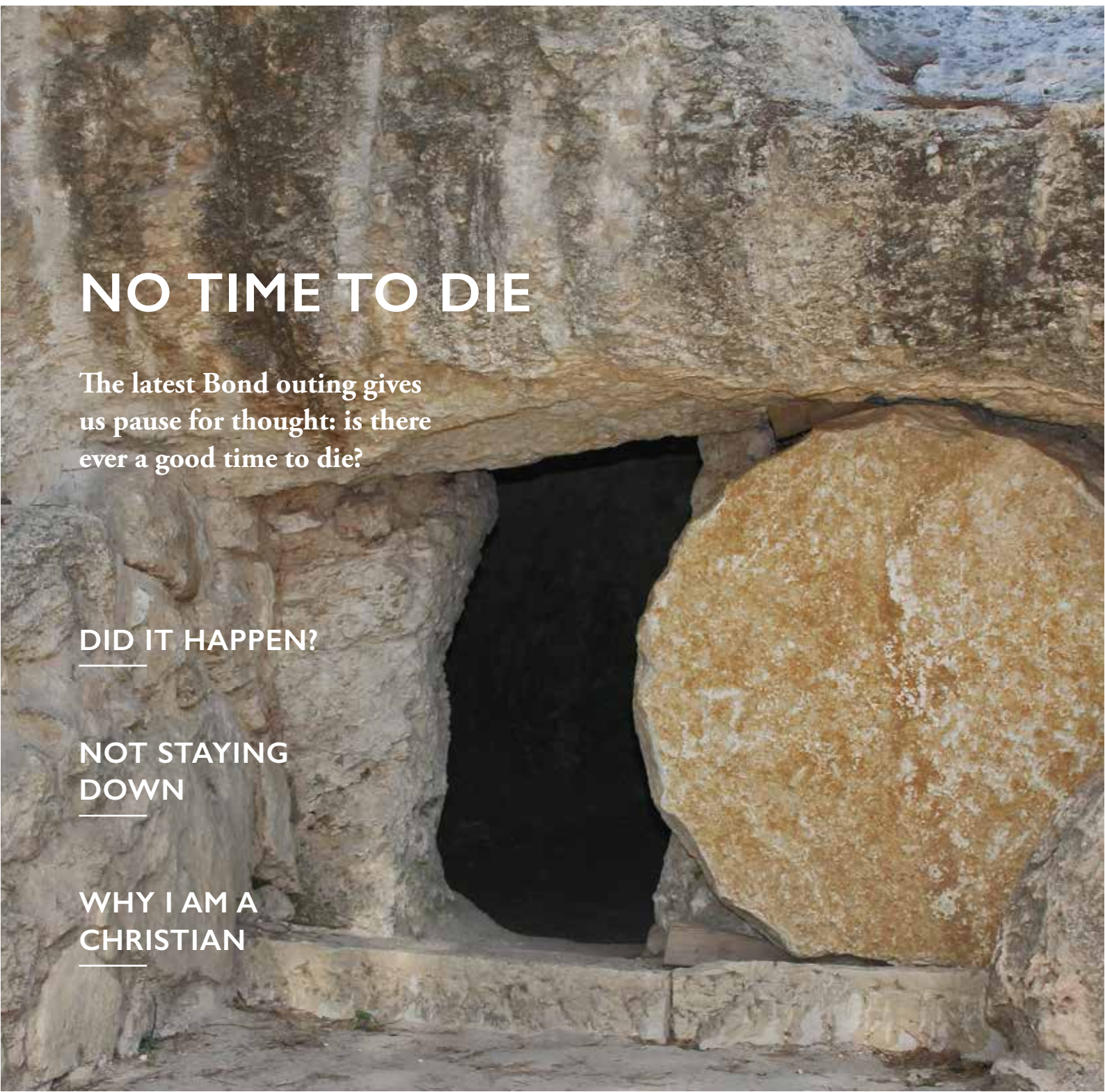
## NO TIME TO DIE

The latest Bond outing gives us pause for thought: is there ever a good time to die?

DID IT HAPPEN?

NOT STAYING  
DOWN

WHY I AM A  
CHRISTIAN



# AT A GLANCE

*“A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.”*

—MAHATMA GANDHI

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# NO TIME TO DIE



BY BARRY ROBINSON  
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Who is your favourite Bond? Like Doctor Who there have been so many of them it's getting difficult to choose. Everyone has an opinion but for me Sean Connery is the quintessential Bond that everyone else has to live up to. He was suave, balancing wry humour and effortless charm with physical prowess and a dynamic magnetism.

Critics have argued that the current Bond, Daniel Craig, is the one who stays true to Ian Fleming's original intent and is the one Fleming himself would have chosen. This may not make him the nation's favourite Bond, but maybe it makes him the best. We have, perhaps, only one more film with Craig as Bond in order to make up our minds, as the latest Bond film to be released – *No time to die* – is reportedly his last in the role.

*No time to die* is an intriguing title for a film, after all, is there ever a right time to die? That's a question the followers of another hero of mine, Jesus Christ, must have considered when they saw hardened Roman soldiers nail him to a cross. They must have felt that this is no time for our revolutionary leader to die.

There had been other revolutionary zealots before Jesus, like Judas of Galilee who led Jewish resistance to a Roman census for tax purposes in 6 CE. They had come to nothing, and now there was high expectation that Jesus of Nazareth would be the one who would defeat the Roman occupiers and establish the long-awaited kingdom of God. But instead of defeating Rome, Rome killed what appeared to be just another potential messiah.

Surely this was no time to die if Jesus of Nazareth really was the messiah Israel had longed for. His closest followers were distraught and depressed, and giving up on yet another charismatic leader's failed attempt to rescue them, they returned to



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their former lives. It was all over, or was it? Something happened that changed those early followers of Jesus from being defeated and dejected into people who would boldly claim that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact God's Messiah. But why would they do that, especially when it risked and eventually cost their lives? What made it different this time?

Their own eyewitness testimony is that they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, literally raised from the dead, and Jesus himself explained that this was his time to die so he could free them from a greater oppression than Roman occupation: our own death and separation from a God who loves us.

Did Jesus of Nazareth rise from the dead, and is he alive today? If not, there needs to be another plausible explanation for why the fledgling Jesus movement didn't just die out and why millions of people continue to believe he is the risen Saviour. James Bond, whether he be portrayed by Connery or Craig, completes his mission by escaping death. The claim of the worldwide Christian movement is that Jesus Christ completed his mission by dying and coming back to life again. This Easter might be a good time to investigate that claim so you can make your own mind up.

# WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN

*(and continue to suck at being one)*



**BY BENJAMIN SLEDGE**  
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A friend of mine once shared with me about the day he walked into youth group and never returned; the day he was asked to burn his “secular” albums.

I remember that day too.

Another friend and I were at a youth group when the pastor asked us to break or burn our favourite CDs. Derek attended once or twice more, but the question always plagued us, “*Did you burn your Metallica album?*” And so he ended up leaving too.

I finally left the church when I learned of my pastor’s “indiscretions”. Those indiscretions included sleeping with his secretary, embezzling donations... *oh*, and drugs.

I didn’t want to believe it at first, but what finally caused the mental break was when I stopped for petrol and noticed a young, homeless man asking for money. People ignored him, busy in the shuffle of their day-to-day lives, and I began to wonder how my pastor would respond? Maybe he would flash that infectious grin, offer a prayer, and then feel godly as he walked away in his snazzy suit.

It would be almost a decade before I set foot in a church again out of my own willingness.

But first I had to learn to play the “game”. And the game was this: intellectually I identified as “Christian”. Emotionally, I thought it was just plain wrong. But I kept up the appearances of Christianity to please those around me so I wouldn’t get the weird “*I’ll pray for you!*” talks or “*You have to believe! You did at one point! You’re just confused right now.*” I knew what awaited me if I told people what I was actually feeling. You know, the scary hell talks where I burn for eternity? That one seems to win so many people over, right?

For me, (and probably most of us) there was a giant disconnect between the character of Jesus and



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the way his followers demanded you live. I liked Jesus. He seemed kind and compassionate and enjoyed associating with the people I associated with (the party crowd). However, I wasn’t interested in being a “Christian” if it meant looking like the status quo. His people were moral Nazis, and they had really strange rules. Once you said the prayer-thing asking Jesus into your heart (what does that even mean???) and got saved, then there were things Christians *do*, like invent swear words that aren’t swear words, or make sure they don’t associate with people that aren’t Christians. And things they *don’t do*, like drinking, premarital sex, listening to secular music. Once you nailed the latter list then you and God were on good terms. Oh, and never struggle. Never doubt. And never have deep issues. The problem was, every Christian I met sucked at being good. They just happened to be really skilled at covering it up and looking pretty – externally. And even the ones who were pretty on the outside usually got disillusioned or just ended up becoming judgmental because they were “nailing it”. I happened to be the guy that wore my train wreck on his sleeve, so I never fitted in.

And honestly, I don't think that much has changed on some level. You can get online at any point and read about large mega-church pastors covering up sexual abuse cases. Or rape charges. Or abuse. Or systemic racism within the four walls of our churches. Us versus Them mentalities. And the overall view held by Millennials, that Christians are judgmental, bigoted, and hypocritical. So when people discover I'm a Christian (let alone a pastor), the response is usually an overwhelming, "You're serious? You're a Christian?! After all that?"

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When I was 27, I met two men who forever changed the way I viewed Christianity. Both were covered in tattoos, occasionally used swear words, and liked beer. All the things I had been told growing up that got you kicked out of *Club God*. And honestly, it confused me. Weren't they in "sin?" But that wasn't why I became a Christian. That would be a stupid reason to join anyway as I could go to the nearest hipster bar and join a tribe like that.

What won me over was the way they loved me and loved people who were hurting and messy. It was the way they shared openly about their hurts and repeated failures. It was the way they loved their wives and spoke so highly about them. It was the joy they had even in the midst of tears and deep suffering. It was the fact they didn't pretend to have it all together or all the answers. Sometimes they would just say "I don't know."

But what they *DID* know was contagious. Infectious. It was big, bold, and beautiful and I was fascinated by it because I had never heard it. Growing up I had heard, "Believe in Jesus and live a moral life = go to heaven". Simple enough. But what they told me ended up being insanely complex and really challenged what I thought I believed. They explained that as Christians our goal is *not* to follow a set of rules to earn God's favour. Often there are people out there who can easily live more moral lives than us. In fact, it seemed there were more non-Christians helping people than those sitting in the pews every Sunday.

To my tattooed, beer drinking new friends, the cross where Jesus died was a reminder that as good as we try to be, we still need someone to save us from ourselves. As human beings we love to judge others, we love to compare ourselves to scoundrels because it makes us look good. But Christianity teaches

that, if anything, we are the scoundrels. It makes us realise what a train wreck we are, it humbles us and enables us to treat others as we ourselves want to be treated.

I know of no other religion that does that.

Other religions say: "This world is going to hell. It doesn't matter. It's not real, but a shadow, so we wait until we die and escape this. We wait until the next life". However, Christ teaches that his goal within the resurrection is to *transform* the world. Christ teaches that his goal is a new heaven and new earth here on earth. Not that we convert people to our tribe and wait for God to nuke this place, but that we're in the business of restoration. That we bring hope to the hopeless. That we help the needy, poor, and oppressed. That we give generously, freeing the captives and the addicted. That we treat others who are different to us better than ourselves. So, why am I a Christian?

Because I know I'm a train wreck. But I also know that God loves me 100%, right now, in the midst of the burning carnage that is often my life. I know that if I were to stack up my cards against most church people, I'd fold every time. I'm not that good at following rules, and I run my mouth a lot. And yet, God loves me and is cheering for me as I get better, and especially when I fall down. Where I see failure, he sees opportunity for growth. Where I see addiction, he sees an opportunity to take a step. Where I've given up, he whispers, "You can make it". So maybe if we can all accept the idea that God's love is wholly separate from our actions, receive it, and give it to others, maybe then we'd have more Christians *that look like Christ*. Christians that don't feel it's important to beat people down with their theology and doctrine, but instead spend their lives in the gutter bleeding alongside other people. I think maybe then, we might just see Christ's kingdom here on earth.

### About Benjamin Sledge

Storyteller | Combat wounded veteran | Metalhead | Designer | Bleeding on a page just makes it more authentic: <https://blog.heartsupport.com>

### About HeartSupport

Created by Grammy-Nominated musician, Jake Luhrs, we help people brave their wounds, find purpose, and discover healing in the fight for mental health: <https://heartsupport.com>



## DID IT HAPPEN?



BY RICHARD FOWLER  
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### **Stones that cry out**

A wall faced me, bathed in light. Hundreds of people were streaming to it. A sense of excitement punctuated by the frequent sight of soldiers with guns reminded me this was no ordinary place. It has grabbed the attention of people beyond geographical and religious boundaries. It is a wall made of stones that witness like a thousand voices, yet is silent.

But witnessing to what exactly?

I walked up to the Western Wall – the most holy place for the Jewish people. I reached out and touched the stones. These are no ordinary stones. They are huge. Warm. Precisely fitted together. Speaking of something certain and sure.

I noticed the people who came to this wall seemed to be seeking something more than what this ever changing, transient world offers. Seeking a spiritual experience of sorts. Maybe a connection with the divine, but definitely a connection with the past.

These stones, as remains, witness to one of the grandest buildings of the ancient Middle East – Herod the Great’s Jerusalem Temple. A spiritual building; a house of prayer where worshippers came to connect with something bigger than themselves. And even though this building no longer stands, still people come.

In its day, one of the Temple’s visitors was Jesus. He was an observer of these stones, too, and said something profound about them. As he descended on the hillside overlooking this Temple, he predicted that the stones would one day be cast down to the ground! I noted this when I saw stones heaped at the southern end of the wall. I questioned, who was this Jesus: a prophet? A king? Or maybe more?

At the time of his last arrival to this house of prayer, people greeted him with praises of, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Who was this Jesus, people wondered? Others didn’t like the description; maybe too religious, maybe they didn’t believe what people were concluding about this Jesus. His response was interesting: “If these should keep silent”, Jesus said, “the stones would immediately cry out”.

I share my experience with you and the questions they led me to. I don’t know what these stones might mean to you. For me they witness of the events of history but, like the worshippers I saw



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around me, they reach into my world now as if they are trying to tell me something. Leading me to ask, who was this Jesus?

### **I once was blind, but now I see**

*I never thought I would find an empty pool so fascinating. But this, apparently, was no ordinary pool. The pool of Siloam that I came face to face with on my trip to Jerusalem claimed to be the scene of a miracle.*

Now, I'm no fan of pilgrimages that take you to some supposed sacred place that promises the believer miraculous recompense for their efforts, Lourdes and all! But the story behind this ancient pool was unusual and intriguing. It caught – no demanded – my attention.

Its true location and the events it played host to were confined to the pages of the Bible until 2004, when archaeologists uncovered this 68.8 metre pool. What I was looking at was the best-preserved site of one of Jesus' reported miracles. I couldn't help but think, what if...?

What if a man who was born blind was really healed here?

Now my imagination began to take over. As I walked down to the steps leading to this empty pool, I imagined the hundreds of people who

would've come to this place each day; including that blind man who Jesus was meant to have sent here. "Go", Jesus was reported saying, "and wash in the Pool of Siloam". The story continues, simply stating, "So the man went and washed, and came home seeing".<sup>1</sup>

As I sat by the now empty poolside, I imagined it full of water. I wished I could have been there to see it, watching the drama unfold, so I could know what really went on. But I couldn't; I wasn't there. Others had to do this investigation into the legitimacy of this peculiar event. And apparently they did.

At the time of this event some refused to believe, so they spoke to the blind man who could now see. Then they interviewed his parents. If you are curious to learn the rest of the story you can read it in the Bible, in the book of John. Spoiler: the sceptics couldn't deny that the man who could not see, now saw. They just couldn't explain it.

It was now up to me – what should I believe?

### **Reference**

<sup>1</sup> The Bible: John 9:7 (NIV)

# NOT STAYING DOWN

*A tragic act of violence took place in the Middle East 2000 years ago. What relevance does it have to us today?*



BY JAMES HENDERSON  
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It's Easter, and what do you think about?

Two weeks off, time to party, let's go on holiday, the sales are on again, family meals, spring is here, better get gardening, clean the house, get the kids some chocolate rabbits, maybe church, hot cross buns, and – what's all this about an empty tomb?

I'm a Christian minister who's worked in Europe and in Africa.

Depending on where you are, Easter passes either with great proclamation or without much notice. In Malta it's met with ceremonial reverence as well as with firework displays dazzling the night skies and with multi-coloured icing on fancy cakes adorned with crosses, saints and angels. In Greece, where Easter is observed sometimes up to one month later than in western churches, there are flowers, traditional bread and red-dyed eggs, symbolising victory over death. In Islamic Marrakesh no one seems to care at all. And, in London? Lots of eating, drinking and merry making.

Of course, you'd expect me to say that I love Easter. On one level, yes, I do, because I get to spend more time with my wonderfully-active grandchildren and then hand them back to their bleary-eyed parents, but on another, it concerns me when I see how sometimes the message of Easter gets obscured in the hype of it all. Will the real Easter please stand up?

As I write this, in my mind I can hear Johnny Cash in his deep, gravelly voice singing his celebrated Easter song, *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?* One of the lines is *Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?* Imagine. Take yourself back to that moment (see insert box).

The Jesus story goes from sadness to elation, from sorrow to joy, from weeping to singing, because ...three days later the stone that sealed his tomb is rolled away! Johnny Cash goes on to sing *Were you there when the stone was rolled away?* The empty tomb thing again. If you or I had been there, there would have been no body to see inside. Jesus was gone! He had been raised from the dead and went to meet his closest friends. One commentator wrote at the time, "After his suffering,



Photo: Salvador Dali, Christ of Saint John of the Cross (painting)



he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive". What relevance is this to us some 2000 years later? Even though none of us was there, in a very real sense this story of Jesus' being crucified and resurrected is our story too. Because the Christian hope is that, in defeating death for himself, he destroyed death for everyone. What do I mean by that? I mean that because Jesus did not stay down in the grave but, instead, he rose up from the dead, then we all have access to a new life both now and after this life. We don't have to stay down, to remain in the rut we've dug ourselves into, to remain hopeless when faced with dying.

Back to Johnny Cash, who would sometimes wear black clothes to make a statement. "I wear black", he said, "for those who never read or listen to the words that Jesus said, about the road to happiness, through love and charity".

Because Jesus died and rose from the grave, that road to happiness becomes possible.

If you'd like to know what Jesus' resurrection means to you, why not drop us an email?

## WATCHING OVER THE DEAD

The source of the Easter story is found primarily in four books of the Bible. They're four accounts of what happened, each from a different viewpoint.

There is one story which all four relate, and it is poignantly moving in its simplicity. Let me take excerpts from each of the passages involved, and merge them together to portray what happened:

*...as evening approached, there came a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, who had become a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. Joseph was a prominent member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. Joseph went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, Joseph's own, cut out of rock, in which no one had ever been laid. Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in the tomb. Thus, with Pilate's permission, Joseph came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus*

*brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about thirty-five kilograms. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. Joseph rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee, followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.*

I wonder what it was like. What if you or I had to take care of the dead body of a loved one? What if it were battered and bloodied? Where would you start? How did Joseph and Nicodemus feel as they took Jesus' body down? Was the cross lowered first, and then, gently, with tears in their eyes, did they extract the nails from the flesh and prise the crown of thorns from his head? What next? Did they take some clean cloth, to wash away the blood and dirt from his body, and, with tenderness, pat it dry in preparation for the first embalming? Was this followed by wrapping the strips of linen, infused with sweet-smelling, preserving spices, around his lifeless body before laying Jesus respectfully in the tomb? How did the women react as they looked on? What emotions gripped them as they followed the men carrying him to the tomb, and watched as the stone closed its entrance?

# JESUS. FAKE, FACT OR FICTION?



BY RICHARD FOWLER  
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*I once read some research that caught my attention: almost a quarter of adults (22%) believe Jesus was a mythical or fictional character. It challenged me into a response: what did I believe about Jesus? And what do you think? Is the life of Jesus fake, fiction or fact?*

Today, many people regard Jesus – the founder of Christianity – and the events surrounding his life as ancient fake news recorded in a book of questionable authenticity.

Maybe in the privacy of your own thoughts you've played with these questions or maybe you were never satisfied with the answers given by a church you grew up in. That's the experience of some of my friends.

The scepticism is understandable; after all, the New Testament, the part of the Bible in which we find the story of Jesus and of early Christianity, was first penned 2000 years ago! That's a lot of time for things to be miscommunicated or distorted. So why do some believe the Jesus of the New Testament actually existed and that what was written about him is accurate?

When I explored this question, I soon realised that if I were to believe the happenings of any ancient document, the New Testament had to be one of them. Why? Because I discovered that it's the single most well-preserved ancient document in the world! How come? Because, apparently, it has the largest number of copies ever recorded – some 25,000! In the Greek language alone (the main language the New Testament was written in) we have 5686 copies<sup>2</sup> of Jesus' life and teachings, which by far surpasses any other ancient writing of any other religious leader. Many of these manuscript date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some documents even go back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. I was surprised to find out that these scriptures were quoted so often in writings outside the Bible (letters, diaries, sermons, etc.) that almost the entire New Testament (approximately 138,020 words) can be compiled



Photo: Cristiano Alessandro, istockphoto.com

from these quotations alone.

But could the events surrounding this Jesus have been fabricated, I asked myself?

Most scholars agree that the New Testament was completed before 100 AD, meaning that hundreds of eye witnesses were still alive at the time. If the events recorded in the manuscripts were false, they would surely have been disputed or discredited. Yet many historians such as Edwin Yamauchi of Miami University, a leading expert on ancient history, argue for, rather than against, their authenticity. "We have better historical documentation for Jesus", says Yamauchi, "than for the founder of any other ancient religion".<sup>4</sup> Another expert documented 39 ancient sources that corroborate more than 100 facts concerning Jesus' life, teaching, crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of my questioning, I was left with some answers. Then I wanted to dig deeper. Was Jesus really who he said he was: the Son of God?

To be continued...

## References

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.talkingjesus.org/research/upload/Talking-Jesus.pdf> (p.5)

<sup>2</sup> *Unshakeable Foundations*, Norman Geisler & Peter Bocchino, 2001, Bethany House Publishers, p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel, 1998, Zondervan, p.86.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Verdict of History*, by Gary Habermas, 1988, Nelson.

# ROSE GARDEN



BY IAN WOODLEY  
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The email's boast was worth a second glance: a happiness guarantee. Given it was an advert from a utility company, I assumed that the promise related to the product and not to life in general. On closer look, I found that this limited promise was restricted to 60 days! Happiness can be a fragile commodity; even this utility company is cautious about over committing itself.

My parents were big country music fans when I was young. One song that they often played was sung by Lynn Anderson, with the catchy line: "I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden". The song is about dealing with the ups and downs of a relationship, though at my tender age that went over my head. But I did pick up a simple message: "Along with the sunshine, there's gotta be a little rain sometime". Life has downs as well as ups. There's no such thing as a happiness guarantee; beware anyone offering otherwise. For me, Lynn Anderson became an early source of wisdom.

Of course, I later learned that my view of *Rose Garden* is far too simple an analogy for life. To stay with the imagery, it doesn't just rain sometimes, on occasion we get monsoons; every now and then a tornado rips through. But that wouldn't make for a catchy tune, so I'll let Anderson off for her simplification. However, all this just emphasises the fragility of happiness; too often it is punctured by events that are sad, bad or even mad.

Looking back on *Rose Garden*, I feel that it does actually offer a good piece of advice: "Come along and share the good times while we can". To share indicates time in some kind of relationship. I wouldn't mind the diamonds (or the cash equivalent) that one line of the song refers to. But do they lead to true happiness? As much as I would like to say yes - the answer is probably not. But good, healthy relationships will. I have had some great opportunities over the years, but



Photo: Tabitha Mort, pexels.com

relationships have brought me the longest lasting joy. I don't hear *Rose Garden* very often these days, but it always reminds me of the things in life that really make me happy.

Years after my first encounter with country music, I began a relationship that has really helped me last out the ups and downs of life. At the time, it took me by surprise; for it led to me dipping my toes into 'spiritual waters', something I turned away from when very young. It's a long story, but I now look at it as a knock on the door from God, an invite to something new. Don't worry, I'm not going to claim that I've now found a happiness guarantee! But it has kept me grounded as to what is important at those times when all seems to be going wrong. God hasn't promised me a rose garden. Instead, there is a promise that he'll always be right there for me. This is another source of wisdom that I endorse. *Rose Garden* is a bit of good advice sung to a catchy tune, but it can only take us so far. In my experience, my relationship with God has always made a difference – to whatever situation I find myself in. Country music may not be to your taste and so it doesn't really matter if you never listen to *Rose Garden*. However, I wholeheartedly recommend giving God a go; he has become integral to all those things in life that make me truly happy.

*This article first appeared on our Because blog at because.uk.com – 3 new posts every week.*

# WAITING ROOM



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“Thank you for your patience. You are number 18 waiting to speak to a receptionist. The current wait time is 20 minutes 15 seconds”.

Don't you hate that kind of message? You need to see a doctor, you've left calling the surgery to the very last moment, and, now, you're left hanging on at the end of the phone only to find out, when you do eventually get through, that there are no appointments left for the day. And, so, you decide to try again the next morning.

It's frustrating to wait.

We've all heard alarming stories about people waiting to be seen at hospital A&Es. The pensioner dumped for hours on a gurney in a lonely corridor, the ambulance arriving 6 hours after the emergency call was made, the child neglected when she needed emergency treatment. They may be exceptions, but they grab our attention, and we don't want it to happen to us or to our nearest and dearest.

I read a story once about a man who was beaten up by thieves and left by the side of the road to die. It's the story that was the inspiration behind the Good Samaritan movement, and it was told by Jesus Christ. Two people who had the power to help him saw him lying there, and they made a decision to walk on by and do nothing, not even to call for help later. Perhaps they were afraid for the own safety – had the robbers really gone? Or, were they prejudiced in some way? Or just too selfish to get involved? What happened next was unexpected. A foreigner, a transient worker perhaps,



Photo: istockphoto.com

an immigrant if you wish, was passing by, saw the wounded man, and bandaged him up. The stranger then transported him to an hotel for rest and recuperation, and he even paid the bill! Quite a story. The victim, though, had to wait unattended, probably for hours, until someone chose to help him.

It makes you think, doesn't it? At least it does me. Are there people I could help, but I don't? I'm too distracted, I don't care enough, life is too busy anyway, let someone else do it. It may just be a little thing like a get-well card, flowers to say you care, an encouraging telephone call, a smile, an anonymous gift, but I can't be bothered. Or something bigger, but will I make the effort?

Let's grab the chance to help others when we can. What are you waiting for? Perhaps there's a little room for improvement.

Read the Because blog at [because.uk.com](http://because.uk.com)  
3 new posts every week.