

The Cross

The crucifixion of Jesus is the central event in God's plan to address the problem of sin and death. Crucifixion was perfected by the Romans into the cruelest possible form of torture. It was usually reserved for executing rebellious slaves and enemies of the state, and was designed to deter anyone from challenging the Roman Empire. It was considered the most shameful and humiliating way to die. Death usually took from a few hours to a few days, and was often hastened by the breaking of the condemned person's legs. Crucified bodies were left to decay on the cross, except when the condemned were Jewish – their bodies were allowed to be removed so as not to upset the Jews too much and incite uprisings against Rome.

1 Corinthians 15:1-6

- What is the Gospel described as here?
- Why do you think Paul regarded this as of "first importance"?

Matthew 26:36-75; 27:1-44

- What type of emotional suffering did Jesus go through as he approached his death?
- What physical suffering did Jesus go through?
- In Gethsemane Jesus prayed three times that "this cup" would be taken from him (**Matthew 26:39-44**). What do you think he meant by this? (*Clue: read Psalm 75:7-8; Jeremiah 25:15-17*)

Matthew 27:45-50

- Why do you think God separated himself from Jesus as he took the sins of mankind upon himself?

Isaiah 53:4-6

- Jesus suffered in your place, died for your sins and his death provides healing for your wounds
- How does this make you feel?

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

- What should the crucifixion of Jesus motivate us to do?
- In what ways would your life change if you lived for Jesus rather than for yourself?

Reflection: What are your thoughts about the crucifixion of Jesus after this study? How grateful are you for God's love displayed on the cross? How do you choose to respond?

FURTHER STUDY

John 1:1-2, 14. Jesus was fully human. How painful do you think it was for him as he was crucified?

Read the Medical Account of the Cross

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12. This passage was written some 700 years before Jesus came to earth. God planned from the beginning to sacrifice His son so that we could be freed from sin and death.

Romans 5:6-8. What was the greatest demonstration of God's love for us?

1 Peter 1:18-19

- In Biblical times, slaves could be redeemed (set free) by the payment of a "ransom", usually by a close family member who then took the redeemed person into his family.
- The death of Jesus is the ransom that was paid to set us free from the slavery of sin and place us in the family of God, reconciled in relationship with Him.

A Medical Account of the Crucifixion

Hanging, electrocution, gas chamber, decapitation: these punishments are feared. They all happen today, and we shudder as we think of the horror and pain. But as we shall see, these ordeals pale into insignificance compared with the bitter fate of Jesus Christ: crucifixion.

There is little or no chance of us being crucified today. For us the cross is confined to ornaments and jewelry, stained-glass windows, romanticized pictures and statues portraying a serene death. Crucifixion was a form of execution refined by the Romans to a precise art. It was carefully conceived to produce a slow death with maximum pain. It was a public spectacle intended to deter other would-be criminals. It was a death to be feared.

Sweat like blood

Luke 22:24 says of Jesus, "and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." The sweat was unusually intense because his emotional state was unusually intense. Dehydration coupled with exhaustion further weakened him. (Note: the scriptures nowhere say that Jesus was sweating blood.)

Beating

It was in this condition that Jesus faced the first physical abuse: punches and slaps to the face and head while blindfolded. Unable to anticipate the blows, Jesus was badly bruised, his mouth and eyes possibly injured. The psychological effects of the false trials should not be underestimated. Consider that Jesus faced them bruised, dehydrated, exhausted, possibly in shock.

Flogging

In the previous 12 hours Jesus had suffered emotional trauma, rejection by his closest friends, a cruel beating, and a sleepless night during which he had to walk miles between unjust hearings. Despite the fitness he must certainly have gained during his travels in Palestine, he was in no way prepared for the punishment of flogging.

A man to be flogged was stripped of his clothes and his hands tied to a post above his head. He was then whipped across the shoulders, back, buttocks, thighs and legs, the soldier standing behind and to one side of the victim. The whip used – the flagellum – was designed to make this a devastating punishment, bringing the victim close to death. It consisted of several short heavy leather thongs, with two small balls of lead or iron attached near the end of each. Pieces of sheep's bone were sometimes also included.

As the scourging proceeds, the heavy leather thongs produce first superficial cuts, then deeper damage to underlying tissues. Bleeding becomes severe when not only capillaries and veins are cut, but also arteries in the underlying muscles. The small metal balls first produce large, deep bruises which are broken open by further blows. The fragments of sheep's bone rip the flesh as the whip is drawn back. When the beating is finished, the skin of the back is in ribbons, and the entire area is torn and bleeding.

The words chosen by the gospel writers suggest that the scourging of Jesus was particularly severe: he was certainly at the point of collapse when he was cut down from the flogging-post.

The mocking

Jesus was allowed no time to recover before facing his next ordeal. Made to stand, he was dressed in a robe by jeering soldiers, crowned with a twisted band of thorny twigs and, to complete the mocking, given a wooden staff as a king's scepter. "Next, they spat on Jesus and struck him on the head with the wooden staff." The long thorns were driven into the sensitive scalp tissue producing profuse bleeding, but even more terrible was the re-opening of the wounds on Jesus' back when the robe was torn off again.

Further weakened physically and emotionally, Jesus was led away to be executed.

The crucifixion

The wooden cross used by the Romans was too heavy to be carried by one man. Instead the victim to be crucified was made to bear the detached crossbar across his shoulders, carrying it outside the city walls to the place of execution (The heavy upright portion of the cross was permanently in position here). Jesus was unable to carry his load – a beam weighing about 40-50 kg. He collapsed under the burden, and an onlooker was ordered to take it for him.

Jesus refused to drink the wine and myrrh offered him before the nails were driven in (it would have dulled the pain). Thrown down on his back with arms outstretched along the crossbar, nails were driven through Jesus' wrists into the wood. These iron spikes, about 15 cm long and 1.5cm thick, severed the large sensorimotor median nerve, causing excruciating pain in both arms. Carefully placed between bones and ligaments, they were able to bear the full weight of the crucified man.

In preparation for the nailing of the feet, Jesus was lifted up and the crossbar fixed to the upright post. Then with legs bent at the knee, a single nail was used to pierce both feet, one foot being placed over the other. Again there was severe nerve damage and the pain caused was intense. It is important to note, however, that neither the wounds to the wrists or feet caused substantial bleeding, since no major arteries were ruptured. The executioner took care to ensure this, so that death would be slower and the suffering longer.

Now nailed to his cross, the real horror of crucifixion began. When the wrists were nailed to the crossbar, the elbows were intentionally left in a bent position so that the crucified man would hang with his arms above his head, the weight being taken on the nails in the wrists. Obviously this was unbearably painful, but it had another effect: It is very difficult to exhale in this position. In order to breathe out, and then take in fresh air, it was necessary to push the body up on the nailed feet. When the pain from the feet became unbearable, the victim would again slump down to hang by the arms. A terrible cycle of pain began: hanging by the arms, unable to breathe, pushing up on the feet to inhale quickly before again slumping down, with this cycle repeating over and over again.

This activity became more and more difficult as Jesus' back was scraped against the upright post, as muscle cramps set in because of the inadequate respiration, and as exhaustion set in. Jesus suffered in this manner for several hours before, with a final cry, he died.

Cause of death

Many factors contributed to Jesus' death. A combination of shock and suffocation killed most victims of crucifixion, but in Jesus' case acute heart failure may have been the final trauma. This is suggested by his sudden death following a loud cry, after only a few hours: a relatively quick death, it seems (Pilate was surprised to find Jesus already dead).

The spear wound

Jesus was already dead as the executioners broke the legs of the criminals crucified alongside in order to speed their deaths. Instead, we read that a soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear. If the soldier intended to make Jesus' death certain, a wound to the heart (through his side) was the obvious choice.

From the wound came a flow of "blood and water." This is consistent with the spear blow to the heart (especially from the right side, the traditional site of the wound). Rupturing the pericardium (the sac surrounding the heart) released a flow of watery serum, followed by blood as the heart was pierced.

Conclusion

The detailed accounts given in the gospels combined with the historical evidence on crucifixion bring us to a firm conclusion: Modern medical knowledge supports the claim of the scriptures that Jesus died on the cross.

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