

The Ultimate Sacrifice

When we read the matter-of-fact accounts of Jesus' arrest, mock trials, beatings and crucifixion recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we sometimes fail to contemplate the intensity of the physical and emotional agony which Jesus endured for us. As singer and songwriter Michael Card so eloquently conveyed in *The Nazarene*, Jesus felt every emotion that we do while he was here on earth, including sadness, frustration and hurt. The chorus of the song summarizes Jesus' life well: *"He came, he saw, he surrendered all, so that we might be born again, and the fact of his humanity was there for all to see, for he was unlike any other man and yet so much like me."*¹

Jesus' physical and emotional suffering prior to his crucifixion began in earnest in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed fervently during the hours prior to his arrest, begging his Father to spare him from the agony of what he knew was ahead of him. During this time of anguished prayer, Luke says that *"his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground"* (Luke 22:44). According to Dr. Alexander Metherell, what Luke describes is a medical condition called hematuria in which *"severe anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. As a result, there's a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out tinged with blood,"* making the skin extremely sensitive.²

Upon his arrest in that Garden, Jesus' disciples deserted him and fled (Matthew 26:56) while Jesus was taken to the home of the high priest. The Jewish leaders had assembled there during the night to fabricate evidence against Jesus in an attempt to justify putting him to death (Matthew 26:59-60). To their frustration, not only were they unsuccessful in finding witnesses whose stories agreed, but Jesus remained silent during all of the false testimony and refused to answer their charges (in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7). When the high priest ordered Jesus to tell them if he was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, he replied,

"Yes, it is as you say. But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). The high priest then tore his clothes, accused Jesus of blasphemy and condemned him as worthy of death. Some of those present spit in Jesus' face, blindfolded him, punched him with their fists, slapped him and mockingly told him to prophesy and identify who had hit him; then the guards beat him (Mark 14:65).

While Jesus was enduring this abuse, the apostle Peter sat out in the courtyard, waiting to see what would happen to Jesus. On three different occasions someone in the courtyard area identified Peter as a companion of Jesus, and each time he denied that he even knew him. As he was cursing and swearing during his third denial, a rooster crowed and Jesus turned and looked at Peter. Peter then remembered that Jesus had told him, *"Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."* Heartbroken at what he had done, Peter went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:61-62).

Since the Roman government had stripped the Jewish governing body of the authority to administer capital punishment (John 18:31), they couldn't execute Jesus for blasphemy. Instead, they had to conjure up a charge that would convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that Jesus was worthy of death. Early in the morning when they bound Jesus and brought him before Pilate, the Jewish leaders accused him of treason against Rome based on his claim to be the king of the Jews. Again, Jesus did not answer the charges. Pilate then spoke with Jesus privately and asked him if he was the king of the Jews. Jesus answered, *"You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me"* (John 18:37). Jesus explained that his kingdom was not of this world, for if it were, his servants would fight to prevent his arrest by the Jews. After speaking with Jesus, Pilate told the Jewish leaders, *I find no basis for a charge against this man"* (Luke 23:4). Pilate looked for a way to release Jesus because he knew that envy was the chief priests' only motive for wanting Jesus to be killed (Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10). When Pilate realized that Jesus was a Galilean and was, therefore, under King Herod's

jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, hoping that he would decide Jesus' fate.

Herod was excited about meeting Jesus because he thought he would get to see him perform a miracle. Not only did Jesus refuse to entertain Herod with a miracle, but he also refrained from answering the accusations of the Jewish leaders who followed him there. In response, Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked Jesus, dressed him in an elegant robe and sent him back to Pilate. Pilate then told the Jewish leaders and the crowd that had gathered, that neither he nor Herod could find a basis for the charges against Jesus, concluding that *"he has done nothing to deserve death"* (Luke 23:13-15). He offered to release Jesus in keeping with his custom of releasing one prisoner at the time of the Passover Feast, but the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead. Barabbas was a notorious prisoner who had been convicted of leading a rebellion against Rome and committing murder.

When Pilate asked what he should do with Jesus, the crowd shouted, *"Crucify him!"* Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again, asking, *"Why? What crime has he committed?"* In response, the frenzied crowd just kept shouting louder and louder, *"Crucify him!"* When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere and that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd in an attempt to claim innocence for Jesus' unjust fate. The people answered, *"Let his blood be on us and on our children!"* Then Pilate released Barabbas and handed Jesus over to be flogged and crucified (Matt 27:20-26).

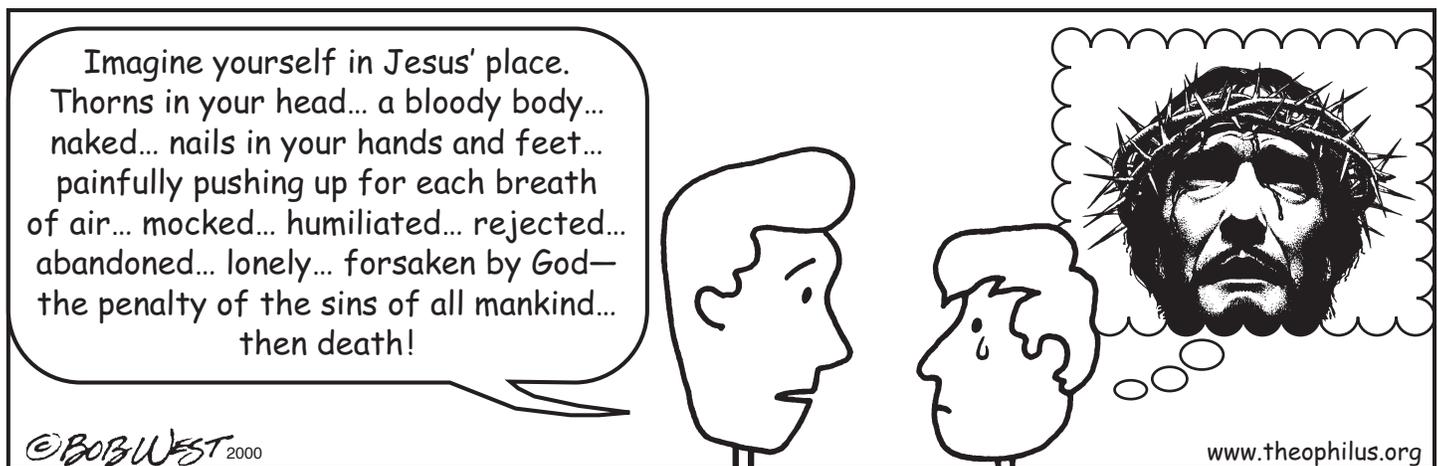
The New Testament does not describe the details of the flogging which Jesus endured, but we know from secular historians and physicians what was involved. Dr. Alexander Metherell, during an interview with Lee Strobel concerning the medical evidence for the death of Jesus, described a Roman flogging as follows: *"The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, these balls would cause deep bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. And the whip had pieces of sharp bone as well, which would cut the flesh severely. The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down the back, the buttocks and the back of the legs. It was just terrible... As the flogging*

*continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. A third century historian by the name of Eusebius described a flogging by saying, 'The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.'"*³ The flogging would continue until the centurion in charge of the prisoner determined that he was near death.

Following Jesus' flogging, the governor's soldiers put a royal robe on him, twisted a crown of thorns and pressed it into his head, put a stick for a scepter in his right hand and knelt in front of him, mocking him and saying, *"Hail, king of the Jews!"* Then they spit on him, slapped his face and hit him on the head with the stick, driving the thorns deeper into his scalp. It seems from John's account of these events in John 19 that Pilate was hoping that the Jews would be satisfied once Jesus had been flogged and would no longer insist on his crucifixion. When Pilate brought Jesus out to the crowd while he was wearing the robe and crown of thorns that the soldiers had put on him, Pilate repeated that he could find no basis for a charge against him, but the Jews responded that Jesus had to die because he claimed to be the Son of God. When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid and tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish crowd kept shouting, *"If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."* Concerned for the security of his job and possibly of his life, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The cumulative effect of the severe stress which produced the bloody sweat in Gethsemane, the lack of food, water and sleep, and the mental and physical abuse inflicted by both the Jews and the Romans would have caused Jesus to be in at least serious, if not critical, physical condition before his actual crucifixion. Once Jesus was back in the hands of the soldiers, they immediately jerked the royal robe off of him. Since the blood and serum secreted from his wounds would have soaked into the robe, causing it to adhere to the ribbons of flesh hanging from his back, its removal would have caused additional excruciating pain as the wounds were reopened and bleeding resumed.

It was on Jesus' raw back that the rough, splintery horizontal bar of the cross was placed as he was ordered to carry it from the palace to Golgotha, the execution site. In his weakened condition, Jesus was



unable to carry the approximately 110-pound timber the full distance, so Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it behind Jesus. Once they reached Golgotha, Jesus was offered a mixture of wine and myrrh which was a mild narcotic intended to ease pain, but he refused the drug. At 9:00 that morning the soldiers laid Jesus down against the rough beam with his arms outstretched and drove five to seven-inch nails through his wrists to hold him in place while the horizontal bar (with Jesus hanging from it) was lifted up and attached to the vertical stake which stayed permanently fixed in the ground. [Even though many paintings show the nails through the palms of Jesus' hands, they had to be driven through the wrists (considered to be part of the hand) or his weight would have caused the skin to tear out between his fingers and he would have fallen off the cross.] Not only did Jesus suffer unbearable pain as the nails were driven through the median nerve in each of his wrists and also through his feet, but both of his shoulders were dislocated as his arms were stretched about six inches in length once he was hanging in the vertical position (a fulfillment of Zechariah 12:10 and Psalm 22:14-16).⁴

According to Dr. Metherell, crucifixion is generally a miserable, slow death by asphyxiation. The reason for this is that hanging on the cross forces the chest into the position required to inhale. In order to exhale, the prisoner must use his feet to push up to ease the tension of the muscles around his chest, even though in the process he has to endure the pain of his raw back scraping against the coarse wood of the cross and the nail tearing through his feet until it lodges against the tarsal bones. As he relaxes he can inhale once again, but to exhale he has to repeat the pushing

up process. This continues until he is too exhausted to push up and breathe anymore.⁵

The physical torture of the cross was terrible, but there is no way that we can comprehend the additional agony that Jesus suffered as a result of being separated from God the Father for the only time during all of eternity. Because Jesus was bearing the guilt of everyone's sins at this time (1 Peter 2:24), the Father was forced to turn away from him. As he was hanging there in agony without a friend to comfort him, he watched the soldiers divide his clothes among themselves, and he listened to the Jewish leaders and the two criminals who were crucified with him mock and insult him. It is difficult for us to understand the depth of love which motivated Jesus to endure all of the abuse which he suffered. At any point in time he could have used his miraculous power to retaliate against those who were taunting him, but that would have defeated the purpose for which he came—to offer his perfect life as the only sacrifice which was sufficient to pay the price for our sins and redeem us from Satan.

From noon until 3:00 p.m. darkness came over all the land. As soon as Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two (symbolizing the removal of the barrier between man and God), there was an earthquake, and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. When the centurion and others who were guarding Jesus saw what happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, "*Surely he was the Son of God!*" (Matthew 27:51-54).

Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses on the Sabbath day, they arranged for the soldiers to break the prisoners' legs so that they could

not push up to breathe anymore. They broke the legs of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, but they did not break Jesus' legs because they determined that he was already dead. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:31-37; in fulfillment of Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10). The fluid which collected in the membrane around Jesus' heart and lungs is described by the medical terms pericardial and pleural effusion, and was caused by Jesus' sustained rapid heart rate in response to his loss of so much blood and other fluids prior to his crucifixion and his resulting heart failure.⁶

Joseph of Arimathea, one of the few members of the Jewish council who had not consented to Jesus' death, went to Pilate and asked for permission to put Jesus' body in his new tomb which had been cut out of solid rock. Pilate agreed, and Joseph and another member of the council, Nicodemus, took Jesus' body off the cross, wrapped it in strips of linen with a mixture of spices, and placed it in the tomb (John 19:38-42). The chief priests and other Jewish leaders, fearing that Jesus' disciples would steal his body and tell people that he had been raised from the dead, convinced Pilate to seal the tomb and post guards there.

Jesus' body stayed securely in the tomb until early on the first day of the week when there was a violent earthquake, and an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled back the stone covering the tomb and sat on it. The guards were so terrified that they became like dead men. When some of the women came to the tomb to further anoint Jesus' body with spices that they had prepared, the angel said to the women, "*Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him'*" (Matthew 28:1-7). While the women were hurrying away to tell the other disciples, they saw and worshiped Jesus, who instructed them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee and he would meet them there. About this time the guards went into the city and told the Jewish leaders what had happened, so they decided to give the guards a large sum of money in exchange for their agreeing to lie and say that Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole his body while they were asleep. The Jewish leaders promised to protect the guards from trouble if the governor heard that story, since according to

Roman law, guards who slept while on watch or allowed prisoners to escape faced execution (Matthew 28:11-15).

As we know from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as from the appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus showed himself alive to different groups of people countless times over the next forty days prior to his return to heaven. Thomas, one of the apostles, was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them the night of his resurrection, and he said that he would not believe that Jesus had risen unless he saw and felt the nail marks in his hands and put his hand into his side where the spear had gone. A week later, Thomas was present when Jesus miraculously appeared before them, and he said to Thomas, "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*" Thomas responded, "*My Lord and my God!*" Jesus then said to him, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:24-29).

There are many evidences of Jesus' resurrection that we do not have the space to discuss here. However, one of the most compelling is the way that so many of Jesus' disciples during the first century allowed themselves to be killed by the Jewish or Roman opposition, rather than to denounce their faith in Jesus and his resurrection. Nobody knowingly and willingly dies for a lie, and first century disciples were in a unique position to verify the truth of Jesus' resurrection because so many witnesses were still alive.

Truly, Jesus Christ our Lord was powerfully shown to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). The apostle John summarized his account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection by saying, "*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:30-31).

References

- ¹Card, Michael. *The Nazarene* (Chatsworth, CA: Sparrow, 1988).
²Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 260; ³*Ibid.*, 261; ⁴*Ibid.*, 263-264; ⁵*Ibid.*, 265; ⁶*Ibid.*, 266.
See also "The Crucifixion of Jesus: The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View" by C. Truman Davis, M.D., in the *Arizona Medical*, March, 1965.

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Name _____

Address _____

During his anguished prayer in Gethsemane immediately prior to his arrest, Jesus' sweat was tinged with blood. What effect would this condition have had on his skin?

Describe the reactions of the high priest and those gathered during the night of Jesus' arrest when Jesus admitted to being the Christ, the Son of God?

How did Peter react when three different people identified him as being a companion of Jesus?

What did Peter do when Jesus looked at him?

Since the Romans would not execute Jesus for blasphemy, what did the Jews accuse Jesus of when they brought him before the Roman governor, Pilate?

After talking with Jesus and then having him examined by King Herod, what did Pilate conclude concerning Jesus (Luke 23:13-15)?

In keeping with his custom of releasing one prisoner at the time of the Passover Feast, Pilate wanted to release Jesus, but the Jewish leaders stirred up the crowd to ask for Barabbas instead. Who was Barabbas?

After subjecting Jesus to a severe flogging, Pilate brought him out to the crowd while he was wearing the robe and crown that the soldiers had mockingly put on him. When Pilate repeated that he could find no basis for a charge against Jesus and tried to set him free, how did the Jewish crowd react?

(over)

Describe the crucifixion process.

In addition to the physical torture of his beatings and crucifixion, Jesus suffered the agony of being separated from God the Father for the only time in eternity. Why was this separation necessary?

Why didn't the soldiers break Jesus' legs? What did they do instead?

When Jesus' body was removed from the cross, where was it put? How was the grave secured?

What happened early on the first day of the week?

What deal did the Jewish leaders make with the men who had been guarding Jesus' tomb?

What is one of the most compelling evidences of Jesus' resurrection?

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