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Introduction

A number of individuals have through the years mentioned hearing brother Doug Leatherman preach the basic material covered in this book. I was well pleased with the impression it had made on them. A request was made for this to be put into manuscript form and it has now been completed. Upon receipt of the writings, I read them and was moved by the simple, yet graphic, discussions about Jesus' death on the cross. The reason for putting this into print is to send it to many parts of the world to help others to a better understanding of what Jesus has done for each of us individually.

It is suggested that this be read and reread in order to receive the total impact intended on our lives. Jesus did what no one else could do for you and me.

Douglas Leatherman, M.D., is well qualified to write about the crucifixion of Jesus. He is a student of the Word of God. He is a medical doctor who as widely respected during his time of practice. He has served the church of Christ in many ways in a number of congregations. He has been a teacher, a deacon, has preached on a number of occasions, and has been a counselor for numerous people both in the church and in the world. I have been told by more than one that they consider him to be an excellent instructor of the Word.

Due to health problems, Doug is no longer active in his medical practice, but remains active in the work of the church.

Doug and Peggy now reside in Enid, Oklahoma. They have a son and two daughters along with some grandchildren. While health problems have slowed the pace of their lives, it has not dampened their desire to remain true to the Word of God and reach the lost.

—Rusty Russwurm

In this lesson, a discussion of some of the physical aspects of the passion, or suffering, of Jesus Christ will be explored. We shall follow Him from Gethsemane through His trial and His scourging to His last dying hours on the cross.

This material is an accumulation of various books, papers, and commentaries over the past several years. I suddenly realized that I had taken the crucifixion more or less for granted all these years—that I had grown callous to its horror by an easy familiarity with the grim details and formed a distant friendship with Him who gave His all for my sins. It finally occurred to me as a physician that I did not know or even presume the actual immediate cause of His death.

The gospel writers do not help too much on this point, because crucifixion and scourging were so common during their lifetime that they undoubtedly considered detailed descriptions totally superfluous; so we have the concise words of the evangelist Matthew, "And when he [Pilate] had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified. ... Then they crucified Him" (Matthew 27:26–35).

Dr. Pierre Barbet, a French surgeon, did extensive research on this—both on a historical and experimental basis. However, he relates to too many relics and questionable artifacts in which he assumes the cause of death.

I am not competent to discuss the infinite spiritual suffering of the Incarnate Christ in atonement for the sins of fallen men. However, the psychological and anatomical aspects of our Lord's suffering we can examine in some detail. That is, what did the body of Jesus of Nazareth actually endure during those hours of torture?

The Cross

Crucifixion is the torture and execution of a person by fixation to a cross. It apparently was first known to the Persians. Alexander and his generals brought it back to the Mediterranean world—in Egypt and Carthage. The Romans apparently learned the practice there and, as with most everything the Romans did, rapidly

developed it to a high degree of efficiency and skill in carrying it out. A number of Roman authors, Livy, Tacitus, Cicero, comment on it. Many innovations and modifications are described in ancient literature.

The Christian or Latin cross as known today can only be traced back to the fifth century A.D.—and that an ivory cross in a London museum. Early Christians abhorred it and refused to write or describe it.

The most common form used was the “T” or Tau cross, which was comprised only of two parts: the stipes, an upright pole or beam, and the patibulum, or cross arm piece. This was the common form used at the time of Christ. It was efficient—quick and deadly. There is overwhelming evidence in reach archaeological findings that this was the most common type used.

The upright post (stipes) or beam was permanently fixed in the ground with a notch at the top into which the patibulum or crossbar could be slipped without trouble. This crossbar would weigh from one hundred to one hundred and twenty pounds and the condemned man was made to carry this to the site of execution. It was during the Dark Ages that the now popular Latin cross or Christian cross was painted, giving us the impression today that Christ carried the entire cross.

These same painters also placed the nails in the hands, again a misconception, for they would easily tear out through the fingers. If we turn to the early scholars of both modern and ancient anatomy, we always find that the forearm is included in the anatomy of the hand. This does not refute the saying of Jesus to Thomas, “Behold, My hands.”

A titulus, or small sign, stating the victim's crime was usually carried in front of the procession and later nailed to the top of the cross; this would give it somewhat the characteristic form of the Christian or Latin cross. Crucifixion is not old or ancient. As late as World War II, Jews were crucified in the Dachau Prison by the Germans. No statistics were preserved; we have only those who witnessed such proceedings. Crude nails—square, sharp, and eight to ten inches long—have been found in England, left by the early Romans.

The initial agony and suffering began in the garden of Gethsemane when Christ knew His time had come. Luke tells us, "And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

Many critics have questioned this; however, a brief search into medical literature reveals a condition known as hematodrosis or bloody sweat. It occurs in the sweat glands of the body when the person is under extreme physical and mental anguish. This process of bloody sweat starts the weakening and possible shock of the physical body of our Savior.

We move rapidly through the betrayal and arrest. It must be stressed again that important portions of the suffering of Christ are missing from the Gospels. This may be frustrating to you, but in order to adhere to our purpose of discussing only the purely physical aspects of the suffering, it is necessary.

After the arrest in the middle of the night, Jesus really had six trials—all containing unjust and false accusations. When He was brought before the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas, the high priest, the first physical trauma occurred. A soldier struck him across the face for refusal to answer. Guards blindfolded Him, mocked Him, spat on Him, and struck Him in the face. In the morning, Jesus, battered, bruised, dehydrated, and exhausted from a sleepless night, is taken to the Fortress Antonia, part of which remains today. Here Pilate examines Him and passes the responsibility to Herod Antipas. At the hand of Herod, He again apparently suffered physical mistreatment, then was returned to Pilate with a robe. It was then that Pilate ordered Barabbas released and condemned Christ to scourging and crucifixion.

There is much disagreement among the authorities as to the scourging. This was a Roman, not Jewish, custom before crucifixion. The hands were tied high to a tree or post. A whip was made of a short wood handle and heavy leather straps bearing, usually, the sharp bones of sheep knuckles or lead balls on the ends. The Jews forbade more than forty lashes, thirty-nine was the maximum allowed, but the Romans did not have this limit.

The scourging was usually carried out by a Roman soldier. The whip was brought down on the bare back, cutting the skin first; then, as the beating progressed, the muscles were made bare, bruised, and bleeding with a marked loss of blood. In a significant number of instances this was enough to kill a man. Ribs were broken, nerves exposed. Again and again, down came the whip until either death or unconsciousness occurred. Both venous and arterial bleeding occurred. Large, deep, dark, bruised surfaces began to appear. Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long shreds. The whole area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. If possible, by Roman law, death is prevented.

Now, the half-fainting Jesus is untied and slumps to the pavement wet in His own blood. The Roman soldiers see great jest in this provincial Jew claiming to be a king. They throw a robe across his bleeding shoulders and place a reed in His hand and a crown of thorns is pressed upon His head. This crown is made up of flexible branches covered with long thorns, commonly used in firewood. Again, there is an abundant amount of bleeding because the scalp is one of the most vascular areas of the body.

After mocking Him and striking Him across the head, driving the thorns deeper into the scalp, more blood is lost. Finally, tiring of their sadistic sport, the robe is torn from His back. The adherent clots of blood and serum cling to the robe and the back wounds are opened up again to massive bleeding and excruciating pain, almost as if He were being whipped again.

In deference to Jewish custom, the Romans return His garments. The heavy patibulum is tied across His bleeding shoulders. The procession Christ, Roman soldiers, and the women begin the slow journey to the place of the stipes. Together with the exhaustion, scourging, blood loss, and deep agony, His attempt to walk erect fails and He stumbles, awakening the painful back. The rough wood scrapes across the exposed flesh. He tries to rise, but human muscles have been pushed beyond their endurance. The centurion, anxious to get on with the execution, selects a North African, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross. Jesus follows still bleeding, sweating, and, in all probability, in cold, clammy shock, to the place of Golgotha. Where is this place today? It is not known, only that it is beyond the ancient city walls. Clad only in a loincloth, Jesus finally makes His way.

Jesus is then thrown to the ground on His bleeding back and quickly the centurion places a large spike in the wrist in one arm, then the other. The arms are not stretched taut, but are left sagging to allow flexion and movement. The patibulum or crossbar is then attached to the top of the stipes. Quickly, the feet are nailed, the left over the right, with the same size large crude nail. They are nailed through the arch of the foot, leaving the knees in a flexible position. The title "King of the Jews" is nailed to the top of the cross.

With the knees flexed, toes downward, full pressure of the body is placed on the nerves of the feet. When this can be tolerated no more, the body sags to where the entire body weight is borne by the nails through the forearm. This produces excruciating pain on the median and ulnar nerves of the hand until this can be tolerated no more. Again, the knees are straightened as much as possible. This process of seesawing up and down further weakens and exhausts the body.

At this point, great waves of cramps sweep over the entire body, the arms fatigue, the legs fatigue. With these cramps come the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can draw into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even on short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and bloodstream and the cramps partially subside.

Spasmodically, He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen. It is most likely that during this time, he utters the seven short sentences which are recorded. The first is uttered while looking down at the Roman soldiers throwing dice for His seamless garment, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." The second is to the penitent thief: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." Then, looking at the terrified and grief-stricken John, He said, "Behold, your mother!" And, looking to Mary His mother, "Woman, behold your son." The fourth cry is from the beginning of Psalm 22: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

He has endured hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as

tissue are torn or stretched from the nail wounds. His lacerated back yielding to unrelenting pain as He plies up and down on the cross of rough timber. Then, another agony begins: a deep crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium, a sac around the heart, slowly fills with fluid due to the extreme trauma and shock. The heart becomes compressed by the fluid. Let us remember again Psalm 22:14: "I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it is melted within Me."

It is now almost over—loss of tissue fluid has reached a critical level. The compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the vital tissues. The tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The markedly dehydrated tissues send their stimuli to the brain—Jesus gasps His fifth cry, "I thirst." Let us remember another verse from the prophets in Psalm 11:15: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death."

A sponge soaked in posca, the cheap, sour vinegar wine which is the staple drink of the Roman legionnaire, is lifted up to His lips. He apparently doesn't take any of the liquid. The body of Jesus now is in extremis and He can feel the chill of death creeping through His tissues. This realization brings out his sixth words, probably little more than a tortured whisper, "It is finished!" His mission of atonement has been completed. Finally, He can allow His body to die. With one last surge of strength, He once again presses His torn feet against the nail and straightens His legs, takes a deeper breath and utters his seventh and last recorded cry: "Father, into Your hands, I commend My spirit."

The rest you know. In order not to profane the Sabbath, the Jews asked that the condemned man be removed from the cross. The Romans usually left the bodies on the cross to rot. The common method of ending a crucifixion was fracturing—the breaking of the bones of the legs—preventing the victim from raising himself to breathe. The victim died from suffocation.

Remember, the most precious gift to man was Christ, the Son of God, and God's love for us. His saving power is free if we but obey His commands. Brethren, do we understand just how deep and all-encompassing this love is? I think not. If it were so, then all mankind would be brothers and love would abound everywhere.

Solomon said, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Jesus, whose crucifixion we have just reviewed, said, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28- 30).

Blacklock's book on New Testament Archaeology sheds fearful light on the crucifixion itself. In 1968, in an ancient cemetery near Jerusalem, a cave was exposed by a bulldozer during road construction. The cave contained some receptacles for the bones of the dead. Here was the first time material evidence of crucifixion had been found.

Evidences here may vary somewhat from the way Christ was crucified. The skeleton of a young man, approximately thirty, by the name of John, showed that the victim was nailed to a cross in a sitting position—both his legs slung sideways with the nail penetrating the sides of both feet just above the heel and through the ankle bones.

Dr. Nico Haas of the Hebrew University, after examination, indicated the man was crucified "... in a compulsive position, a difficult and unnatural position evidently to increase the agony." The remains of the nail were embedded in the ankle bones and the nail, in fact, struck a knot in the cross, bending the tip of the nail, thus requiring those who took the body down to break off the nail and leave it imbedded in the bones.

The arm bones, not the palms, each were scratched from nails being pierced into the forearm; diagonal movements writhing left permanent scars on the radius and ulnar bones.

Although there remained little question that this man was crucified about 2000 years ago, the Israeli governments Department of Antiquities said it would be "mere" fantasy to think the skeleton might be that of Jesus Christ.

Was not Jesus Christ's tomb empty?



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