

## On the Physical Death of Jesus

Jerry C. Brewer

While most everyone knows of the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross at Calvary outside the walls of Jerusalem, few understand the pain and horror of that experience. In 1986, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* carried an article entitled, "On The Physical Death of Jesus," written by William Edwards, Wesley Gabel and Floyd Hosmer. The article described the excruciating physical ordeal that was known as crucifixion.

The word "excruciating" is entirely appropriate in this context. Our English word excruciating is from a combination of two Latin words — "ex" meaning, "from" or "out of" and "cruciatus" which means "cross."

That's precisely the kind of death Jesus died for the sins of the world — a death experienced in the physical flower of His life that was agonizing. And He took your place and mine on that cross.

Physically, Jesus was in the prime of His manhood. At about the age of 33, he had traveled across the land of Palestine by walking, and was doubtless in fine physical condition. But his quick death on the cross surprised even the Roman Governor Pilate who had ordered His death, according to **Mark 15:43-45**. Jesus' physical condition was probably affected by the great stress He underwent between 9 p.m. Thursday and 9 a.m. Friday. During the night he had been abandoned by His closest friends, Peter had denied Him and He had suffered a beating after His first Jewish trial.

The authors also say that, "in the setting of a traumatic and sleepless night, He had been forced to walk two and a half miles to and from the sites of his various trials. These factors, they say, "may have rendered Jesus particularly vulnerable to the hemodynamic effects of the scourging.

And that's another important consideration in Jesus' death—His scourging. According to the articles authors, "Flogging was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution, and only women and Roman Senators, or soldiers (except in the case of desertion) were exempt. The scourging, or flogging, was a torturous preliminary to crucifixion. The victim was stripped of his clothing and his hands were tied to an upright post. His back, buttocks and legs were then flogged either by two soldiers — one on either side of the man or by one soldier who alternated sides. The instrument used in the scourging was a short whip, called a flagrum or flagellum, which had several single or braided leather thongs of different lengths, with small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones tied into the braids at intervals.

The severity of the scourging often depended on the disposition of the soldiers, and was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death. After the beating, the soldiers often cruelly taunted their victim. As the soldiers repeatedly struck the victim's back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and sheep bones would cut into

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His skin and subcutaneous tissue. As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. The pain and blood loss from this beating usually set the stage for circulatory shock and the extent of blood loss may very well have determined just how long the victim would live on the cross.

According to **Matthew 27:24-26**, Jesus was severely whipped in the Praetorium and although the gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John do not describe the details of the beating, it is implied in **First Peter 2:24** and a study of the Greek words describing it indicate it was particularly harsh. Then the Roman soldiers, amused that this weakened man had claimed to be a king, mocked Him by placing a robe on His shoulders, a crown of thorns on His head, and a wooden staff as a scepter in His right hand. Then they spat on Him and struck Him on the head with the wooden staff.

Then when they tore the robe from Jesus' back, they probably reopened the scourging wounds. His severe scourging, combined with a great blood loss probably left Jesus in a pre-shock state, according to the physicians article. The physical and mental abuse He suffered at the hands of both Jews and Romans, continued with His lack of food, water, and sleep also contributed to His weakened state. So, even before His actual crucifixion, Jesus physical condition was serious and possibly critical, according to the medical authorities.

What a horrible ordeal Jesus suffered for our sins. And it was all done with the foreknowledge of God, according to **Acts 2:23**. God gave His Son and His Son gave His life to redeem us from sin.

But that precious blood, shed in His death, must be applied to the soul through gospel obedience. Jesus died for you and me, the guiltless for the guilty and now invites all men to receive life through His death. The benefits of His blood is applied to our souls when we believe He was who he claimed to be—the Christ, the Son of God—repent of our sins, confess our belief in him with our mouths, and submit to Him in baptism into His death (**Romans 6:3-5**).

After Jesus suffered the flogging inflicted by Roman soldiers, He was in an extremely weakened condition. In such a condition, he was still forced to carry his cross to the place where He was to be crucified, until he fell beneath its weight and Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it (**John 19:17; Mark 15:21**).

Since the weight of the entire cross was about 300 pounds, only the crossbar was carried. This weighed about 75 pounds and was placed across the nape of the victim's neck and balanced along both shoulders. The outstretched arms were then usually tied to the crossbar and the procession to the crucifixion site was led by a Roman Centurion.

During this procession, a Roman soldier usually carried a sign on which the condemned mans name and crime were written. This sign was then nailed to the cross for the public to see. In Jesus' case, Pilate had written, "**This is Jesus The King of The Jews.**"

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Then, at the crucifixion site, the victim was thrown to the ground with his arms outstretched along the cross bar. The hands could either be tied to the crossbar or nailed, but nailing was the preferred Roman method. The nails used were tapered iron spikes about five to seven inches long with a square shaft of about three-eighths of an inch across.

The nails were driven through the wrists, rather than the palms and after the victim was securely nailed to the cross, he was lifted up to hang there. Then the feet were nailed to the upright on which the crossbar hung.

When all this was done, the soldiers and onlookers often taunted the victim and the soldiers divided his clothes among themselves. They could not do this with Jesus' seamless garment, so they cast lots for it (**Matthew 27:35**). Then, they waited for the victim to die. The length of time a person survived on the cross ranged from three or four hours to three or four days, depending on the severity of the beating. During this time, insects would often light upon or burrow into the open wounds of the helpless man and birds would tear at these places. It was also customary to leave the body to be devoured by predatory animals, but Roman law allowed the family of the condemned to take the body if they requested it.

Adding to the pain and agony of this ordeal, when the victim was thrown to the ground on his back for nailing him to the cross, his scouring wounds most likely would become torn open again and contaminated with dirt. And with each breath he took, the painful scouring wounds would be scraped against the rough wood of the upright part of the cross.

It has also been shown that the ligaments and bones of the wrist can support the weight of a body hanging from them, but the palms cannot. That's why the spikes were probably driven through Jesus' wrists between the two rows of carpal bones. This might not have produced a fracture, but it would sever the rather large median nerve and that would produce excruciating bolts of fiery pain in both arms, according to the article by the physicians. We might also note that although the Scripture references the nails in his hands the ancients customarily considered the wrist to be a part of the hand.

The article goes on to say that the major physiologic effect of crucifixion, beyond the excruciating pain, was a marked interference with normal respiration, particularly exhalation. The person who was crucified could barely breathe and they say the body, pulling down on the outstretched arms and shoulders would tend to fix the intercostal muscles in a state of inhalation and severely hinder passive exhalation. In other words, he could take in his breath, but was hindered from exhaling, so his breathing was very shallow. They also note that muscle cramps or what they call "tetanic contractions" due to fatigue would further hinder his breathing. Thus each effort at breathing would become agonizing and tiring. That's important to remember as one studies Jesus words from the cross. Each of his utterances was made with the most agonizing pain and effort.

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For one on a cross to adequately exhale, he had to lift his body by pushing up on the feet and flexing the elbows. But this movement would place the entire weight of the body on the tarsals producing further searing pain.

The flexion of the elbow would also cause the wrists to rotate about the iron spikes and cause fiery pain along the median nerves. The lifting of the body would also painfully scrape the scourged back of the victim against the rough wooden upright part of the cross and muscle cramps of the outstretched and uplifted arms would also add to the discomfort.

As a result of all this, each effort to breathe would become agonizing and lead eventually to asphyxiation. Such was the love of God and Child for you and me.

The death of Jesus by crucifixion was one of the cruelest forms of execution ever devised by man. It probably began first among the Persians. Alexander the Great later introduced the practice to Egypt and Carthage, and the Romans appear to have learned of it from the Carthaginians. Although the Romans didn't invent it, they perfected it as a form of torture and capital punishment, designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. That is the assessment of Edwards, Gabel and Hosner who wrote, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ" in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Jesus spoke seven times from the cross, and since speech occurs while a person exhales, his short utterances must have been particularly difficult and painful. At about 3 p.m. on that Friday, Jesus cried with a loud voice, bowed His head, and died. Luke says, "AND WHEN JESUS HAD CRIED WITH A LOUD VOICE, HE SAID, FATHER, INTO THY HANDS I COMMEND MY SPIRIT; AND HAVING SAID THUS, HE GAVE UP THE GHOST" (**Luke 23:46**).

The Roman soldiers and onlookers recognize the moment of his death, and a centurion standing by even declared, "TRULY, THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD" (**Mark 15:39**). The Jews didn't want the bodies on the crosses after sunset, which was the beginning of the Sabbath, and asked Pilate to hasten the deaths of the men who were crucified. This was done by breaking their legs. Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus, but when they came to Jesus, they discovered that he was already dead, so they did not break His legs.

The Scripture says "BUT ONE OF THE SOLDIERS WITH A SPEAR PIERCED HIS SIDE, AND FORTHWITH CAME THERE OUT BLOOD AND WATER" (**John 19:34**). The authors of the article on Jesus' physical death say the wound was in the thorax or chest and that "a large flow of blood would be more likely when the thin-walled right atrium or ventricle was perforated." They also note that the water probably represented "serous pleural and pericardial fluid."

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The death of Jesus after such a short time on the cross amazed Pilate, and the authors say Jesus' death may have been hastened by His state of exhaustion, and the severity of the scourging with its great loss of blood and pre-shock state. They cite the fact that Jesus was unable to carry the crossbar to support their conclusion. It's also of interest that the conclusions of these medical experts refute the Moslem claim that Jesus didn't die on the cross. They say the cause of His death may have been due to many factors related to hypovolemic shock, exhaustion, asphyxia and perhaps acute heart failure.

They point out that the important feature may not be *how* Jesus died, but rather *whether* He died. Here's what they conclude: "Clearly the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear, thrust between His ribs, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.

While we have discussed the death of Jesus from a medical point of view in this series of articles, the central point to be made about the death of Jesus is *why* He died — that He died for the sins of us all. The law of God demanded justice — death for those who sin — and nothing in that law allowed for forgiveness once man had sinned. But God is also a God of mercy and provided for us what we could not provide for ourselves — a perfect sacrifice for sin in the person of His own Son, Jesus Christ. It was in his death that Jesus shed His precious, guiltless blood and it is that blood which cleanses man from his sins (**First John 1:7; Ephesians 1:7**). But the only way to receive the benefits of Christ's blood is to be in Christ. If you believe Jesus is the Son of God and the promised Messiah, then you need to repent of your sins (**Luke 13:3**); confess that belief before men (**Romans 10:10**) and be baptized into Christ where His blood cleanses of all sin (**Acts 2:38**).