

Death by Crucifixion

The Passion of Christ – Part VIII

John 19

Introduction

Dr. Thomas Dooley wrote a book called, *The Night They Burned the Mountain*. He had served as a missionary doctor to the Laotians and had become their friend. He was once given a tiny Himalayan moon bear as a pet. It was a cuddly ball of brown fur, full of interesting antics. Dr. Dooley began to build a cage for the animal, and, as he was working on the cage, an old Chinese man happened upon him. The old man simply stopped, stared, and then began to sob as he looked at the cage. Dr. Dooley went to him to discover the reason for the tears. He was told a story of the greatest tragedy he had ever heard.

The Chinese man and his son had once worked together on a commune in Red China. He reminded the doctor that laborers on the communes at harvest time were not to have one grain of rice for themselves, for it was all the property of the Republic. But, his wife had become very sick with beriberi and malnutrition, so the son had concealed a few handfuls of rice in his clothing to take to his starving mother. He was discovered, however, and the authorities decided to make a public example of the young boy. They imprisoned him in a cage, not unlike the one that Dr. Dooley had made for his pet bear, and put the caged youth in the center of the city. The cage was so small that the boy could not move or even sit up straight. The man went on to say,

His mother and I were forced to watch, she from one side of the square and I from the other. But the guards would not allow us to go near him. Day after day, as we looked on, my boy died slowly, under the broiling sun with nothing to eat or drink, covered with filth and flies. It was good when the guards pronounced him dead.

That man never forgot the sight of that cage and his son's slow death!

Frankly, I am in agreement with Kent Hughes, who wrote,

It is easy to discuss the cross of Christ in a disinterested way . . . to think about it – and then to forget about it. The trouble is, we are desensitized by daily scenes of real violence . . . bloodshed and murder no longer have the power to move us. So also, the death of Christ on the cross has become so much a part of our religious upbringing that we no longer really notice it, much less are we moved by it.

It is possible for me to preach, as thousands have preached before me, of the cross – and then for us to go and eat Sunday dinner, with mashed potatoes and gravy, without ever being moved. I cannot do anything to change that, ladies and gentlemen, but my prayer has been, and is now, that the Spirit of God, through me, will bring the truths of Calvary home to you with forceful reality.

I want us to stand in amazement, like the apostle Paul, who wrote, in Philippians, chapter 2, verse 8b,

He . . . [became] obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

As we discuss the crucifixion, I want us to see the events as if for the first time. They are real; they are horrifying; they are liberating. When properly seen, they are an incredible window into the heart of God, who, to paraphrase John, chapter 3, verse 16, “. . . loved us so much that He sent His Son to die on the cross, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Jesus, the Son of God, is about to be willingly caged – tortured to death – and his Father will not intervene.

I want to give these events to you in the form of three scenes.

Scene #1

The “Half-way Death”

Scene number one opens in John's gospel, chapter 19, verse 1.

Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged Him.

Now, in our previous discussions, you may remember that Pilate tried several things to have Jesus released, but nothing worked. He finally turned Him over to his calloused Roman soldiers and let them have Jesus.

Every person who was crucified was first scourged or flogged. It was commonly referred to as the “half-way death”. Most of its victims slipped into a shock-like state and some died before they ever reached the cross. This was no Singapore caning – no matter how painful that was.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived in Rome during the Lord’s lifetime, wrote about the son of Ananus, “who was scourged until his bones were laid open.”

Eusibius, a third century writer, reported that many of the early martyrs were scourged until “the deepest veins and the arteries were exposed, and even the inner organs of the body were seen.”

John does not give any description of either the crucifixion or the scourging. Why? Because his readers already knew what the details were. They had witnessed some of their own relatives and friends go through it.

In fact, just fifteen years before John published his gospel, Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Roman army. During the siege of Jerusalem, Roman troops would crucify five hundred Jews every day for several months. Scourging and crucifixion were facts of life for the believers who would read the gospel we are reading today!

So, John tells us, in verse 1, that Jesus was delivered to be scourged; to experience this “half-way death”.

Scourging was administered by a professional executioner known as a “lictor”. Many times there were two of them alternating their blows.

Their weapon was a flagellum, which was a whip-like tool with a short wooden handle and long leather straps. The straps were braided in varying lengths and pieces of metal and bone were sewn, at intervals, into the braided leather.

The severity of the scourging depended on the mood of the lictors. From what John recorded, the mood was vicious and vindictive.

The Lord had all his clothing removed, then He was tied to a stone post with his hands tied to an upright post. After they were finished, Jesus would, like any other man, be close to collapsing, or even dying.

Several years ago, doctors from the Mayo clinic researched and then, wrote a detailed report of the medical aspects of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus. They published their results in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Let me read what they wrote, but I want to say that I do not intend to see how grisly or grotesque I can be, I simply want you to understand what Jesus Christ went through for you and me.

As the Roman soldiers repeatedly struck the victim’s back with full force, the iron balls, or stones, would cause deep contusions and the leather thongs and sheep bones would cut into the skin and underlying tissue. Then, as the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. Pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock. The extent of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross.

Now look at verses 2 and 3.

And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and arrayed Him in a purple robe; and they began to come up to Him, and say, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and to give Him blows in the face.

A. W. Pink wrote,

Christ was on the point of making atonement for sin, therefore sin must be revealed in all its enormity.

Sin is lawlessness, therefore did Pilate scourge the innocent One.

Sin is transgression, therefore did Pilate set aside all the principles of Roman law.

Sin is rebellion against God, therefore did Jew and Gentile alike mistreat the Son of God.

Sin is an offense, therefore did they outrage every dictate of conscience and propriety.

Sin is coming short of the glory of God, therefore did they heap insults upon His Son.

Sin is defilement, therefore did they cover His face with vile spittle.

The Lord's hand had dispensed healing; their hands struck blows. His voice had spoken words of cheer; they reviled Him. His holy soul overflowed with love and mercy; they were embittered, murderous, despicable.

But notice, in John's record, there is no mention of Jesus pulling the crown from His head; no scene of Him letting the purple robe slip from His bleeding shoulders. No, there He would stand, the Lamb, silent before His slaughterers, a mass of swollen, bruised, and bloodied flesh.

This was the cup of damnation and, as C. H. Spurgeon wrote, "He would willingly lift it to His lips and drink it all dry!"

Pilate fails to release Jesus and the crowd, in verse 15, is screaming,

. . . "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."

Continue to verses 16 and 17.

So he then delivered Him to them to be crucified. They took Jesus therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.

Scene #2

The "Via Dolorosa"

Turn to Matthew, chapter 27, for a more complete account of this mile long walk. We will call this scene number two, the "Via Dolorosa" – the road, or way, of suffering.

Look at Matthew, chapter 27, verses 31 and 32.

And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. And as they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

It was the custom, of this day, for the condemned man to be taken, procession style, through the streets of the city, in order to display him to the crowds, as well as to announce his crime. It was a great deterrent to crime and the Romans "played it to the max".

Jesus was surrounded by four Roman soldiers. There would also be the Centurion, in front, carrying the titulus. This is the wooden sign on which was printed the crime of the condemned man.

Now, we all have had a mental image of Jesus dragging the cross wearily, until He stumbles and falls. Nowhere in the record of Scripture does it say that Jesus fell, or even stumbled. Perhaps they knew He was too weak to carry the crossbeam. Or, perhaps they wanted Him killed quickly, and He would have had to walk too slowly in His weakened condition. We do not know.

Matthew, chapter 27, verse 32, simply says,

. . . they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

Warren Wiersbe made an interesting suggestion. He said,

The bearing of the cross was a mark of a criminal's guilt; and Jesus was not dying because He was a criminal condemned of some crime or sin; it was mankind that was guilty. So, you see Jesus walking down that Via Dolorosa, led in front by the Centurion declaring His true title, "King of the Jews," while a representative of guilty humanity carries the cross.

Now, I need to reformat your thinking. You need to understand that the cross weighed nearly three hundred pounds. There was no way anyone could manage to drag a three hundred pound cross over the distance of a mile and up a hill.

Thanks to the Jewish and Roman historians, we know that the vertical piece of the cross, called the "stipe," was permanently anchored at the site of execution. It was the crossbeam, "the patibulum," that was actually carried, and weighed sometimes, nearly one hundred pounds. The condemned man carried it on his shoulders, with his hands, usually, tied to the crossbeam.

When they would arrive at the site, the patibulum would be placed on the ground and the condemned man would also be placed on the ground on his back. His hands would be nailed to the crossbeam and four soldiers would then lift that crossbeam and slip it over the mortis and tenon joint.

Scene #3

The Horrifying Death

This brings us to scene number three, which undoubtedly is the beginning of a scene that makes the hideousness and cruelty of the first two scenes seem like child's play.

Look at Matthew, chapter 27, verses 33 and 34.

And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, they gave Him wine to drink mingled with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink.

Crucifixion was an invention of the Assyrians and the Persians who practiced this form of execution a thousand years before the time of Christ.

The Persians believed that the earth was sacred and did not wish to defile the earth with the body of an evil doer. So, they nailed him to a cross and left him to die there, waiting for the vultures to finish the job.

Alexander the Great seemed fond of this form of execution. He crucified two thousand prisoners of war at a time. He introduced the practice to the Carthaginians, and later, the Romans perfected the torture to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering.

To prolong the process they added a crude seat, or "sedulum," which allowed the condemned to live up to four or five days. They usually died from a combination of dehydration, shock, blood loss, paralysis of the diaphragm, and impatient vultures; or from Roman soldiers breaking their legs, which caused them to fall off the saddle and no longer be able to pull themselves up to fill their lungs with breath.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, spikes were used. You need to know that the ancients considered the hand to include not only the fingers and palm, but the wrist as well. Because the spikes would have easily torn through the tissue and small bones of the palm, the practice was to nail the spikes through the wrist.

Then, the feet would be nailed. The legs would be bent in a crouching position and turned to one side. The feet could be overlapped and nailed through the front.

A skeleton was discovered, some time ago, of a young man who had been crucified. His wrists bones were punctured and a spike was still anchored, having been nailed through his ankles.

The pain would have been excruciating. It is interesting that the word, "excruciating," came from the Latin word which literally meant, "out of the cross". This form of death created its own vocabulary for pain.

I have discovered that respected and godly women of the city took on themselves a ministry of mercy. In obedience to Proverbs, chapter 31, verse 6a, which said to, "Give strong drink to him who is perishing", they mixed a narcotic, pain-reducing drink that they offered to the condemned criminals. Jesus refused this narcotic. He would allow no alleviation of suffering and He would maintain his lucidity to minister mercy to the dying thief, as well as to give his wonderful final words, which we will discuss at a later time.

Now, if you were a Roman citizen, you need never fear death this way. Cicero, the Roman statesman, said, "Let the cross never come near the body of a Roman citizen; nay, not even near his thoughts or eyes or ears."

Cultured Gentiles refrained from even saying the word "cross".

That had interesting implications, as Paul would later write to Roman and Gentile believers, in Romans, chapter 6, that every believer was "crucified with Christ." And, as Paul would write, in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 14a,

May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .

Now look back at John's gospel, chapter 19, verses 18 through 20.

There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. And Pilate wrote an inscription also, and put it on the cross. And it was written, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Therefore this inscription many of the Jews read, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek.

Imagine, the inscription was written in the language of the Jews, in the language of the world power, and in the language of the most universal tongue the world would ever know. In other words, Jesus was the King of Kings, and the whole world can make Him their King.

Continue to verse 21.

And so the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of

the Jews’; but that He said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’”

In other words, “Insert the little word ‘eimi’ after ‘Nazarene’.” – which means “I am” in Greek.

Verse 22,

Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

He knew this would infuriate the jealous Jewish leaders; this was salt in their wounds. And imagine, the first gospel tract ever published was by the hand of a pagan ruler – and thousands of Jews read it! Since then, millions have read it as well. There Jesus hung, and the inscription was not a record of his crime, but an announcement of His royal character – He was the King! By the way, the thief would read that strange tract and, ultimately, believe.

Now look at verse 23.

The soldiers therefore, when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier and also the tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece.

You need to understand that this was the overtime pay for the soldiers. The clothing of the criminals would be added to their own wardrobes as payment for their distasteful duty.

Continue to verse 24.

They said therefore to one another, “Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be”; that the Scripture might be fulfilled, “They divided My outer garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.”

At the foot of the cross, these calloused soldiers are shaking makeshift dice in one of their helmets - the first one to fly from the helmet was the winner.

Why the fuss? They were shaking dice for something very special – a waist length linen shirt, or “chiton,” worn next to the skin, which was soft and seamless. There was only one other person in Jerusalem who wore one – the high priest.

Josephus, and other authorities on Christ’s culture, substantiate the fact that the high priest wore a “chiton” as part of his special high priestly garb. Apparently, a seamstress had believed Christ’s claim to be the Forgiver of sins and had taken the time to make, for Him, a “chiton” of His own.

What irony – the role of the high priest was to bring the people before God and the knowledge of God to the people. The very word “priest,” in Latin, means, “bridge builder”. The high priest was supposed to build a bridge between God and man. But, no human priest could ever do it completely, eternally.

And what was Christ doing? He was doing what only the divine High Priest could do – building a bridge from earth to heaven; a bridge, in the form of an old rugged cross.

Four Calls From the Cross

From this cross a call goes out; in fact, let me suggest four calls that go out.

A call to reality

1. First, the cross gives a call to reality.

Do not ever be deluded into thinking that, since Christ was God, that somehow His suffering was not as great for Him as it would have been for us. Oh no. He hung there as a man, among men, in total dependence upon the Father. His pain was alleviated by nothing! If anything, the fact that He was also God only heightened his suffering, for He, the sinless One, would become vile sin for us.

A call to recognition

2. Secondly, this cross provides a call to recognition.

God the Son is capable of understanding your deepest disappointments and sorrows. He suffered too. He experienced betrayal, denial, violation of his basic rights, physical torture, abandonment, thirst, humiliation . . . In fact, He suffered infinitely, so that we would only have to suffer temporarily. He experienced sorrow, so that we could experience joy.

He emptied Himself, so that we could become eternally rich.

A call to rejoice

3. Thirdly, the cross also gives a call to rejoice.

If the cruel events of this crucifixion have anything to teach us, it would be that God is in control of the worst of circumstances. On the surface, it appears that Jesus’ life was wasted, that His cause had failed – it was a comedy of errors. But the truth

is, God's divine plan was being worked out. In this dark and terrible moment, God was completely in control – and He will, ultimately, bring rejoicing out of sorrow.

A call to repentance

4. Finally, this cross still rings out a call to repentance.

John the Baptist introduced Jesus, at the beginning of Christ's ministry, by saying, according to John, chapter 1, verse 29b,

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Jesus Christ did not hang on the cross for the good deeds of religious people; He was not nailed to the cross so that you could add Him to your Sunday school attendance, or to your baptism, or to your good deeds, or to any other god you hope will take you to heaven – He hung on the cross as the High Priest; as the Passover Lamb; as the only way to heaven – He was, and still is, the living bridge! And anyone who is willing to admit He died for their sins too, can walk across this bridge into the family of God.

In the seventeenth century, a popular devotional writer was Lewis Bayly. Although rather unknown today, his devotional handbook, *Practice of Piety*, was popular reading a few centuries ago. In fact, John Bunyan, who would later write, *A Pilgrim's Progress*, was given that devotional volume by his wife as a wedding present. Near the end of that devotional guide, there is a conversation between the soul and Christ, in which Christ explains to the soul the meaning of the cross.

I want to close our discussion by reading a few lines of that "conversion".

*Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be taken,
when Thou mightest have escaped
Thine enemies?*

*Christ: That thy spiritual enemies should not
take thee, and cast thee into the
prison of utter darkness.*

Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be bound?

*Christ: That I might loose the chords of
thine iniquities.*

*Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou be lifted up
upon a cross?*

*Christ: That I might lift thee up with Me to
heaven.*

*Soul: Lord, why were Thy hands and feet
nailed to the cross?*

*Christ: To enlarge thy hands to do the works
of righteousness and to set thy feet at
liberty, to walk in the ways of peace.*

*Soul: Lord, why wouldst Thou have Thine
arms nailed abroad?*

*Christ: That I might embrace thee more
lovingly, My sweet soul.*

*Soul: Lord, why was Thy side opened with a
spear?*

*Christ: That thou mightest have a way to
come near to My heart.*

The foot of the cross touched earth, as if to show, God has moved to touch man.

The top of the cross pointed heavenward, as if to point the way to God.

The arms of the cross stretched outward, as if to say, "Whosoever will, may come. Even me, even you."

Let us sing this hymn.

*Alas! And did my Savior bleed, and did my
Sov'reign die?*

*Would He devote that sacred head for such a
worm as I?*

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the
light*

And the burden of my heart rolled away,

It was there by faith I received my sight,

And now I am happy all the day!

*But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of
love I owe;*

*Here, Lord, I give myself away; 'tis all that I
can do.*

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the
light*

And the burden of my heart rolled away,

It was there by faith I received my sight,

And now I am happy all the day!