

THE CROSS OF GRACE

Purpose: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* (John 3:16-17)

Here, the gospel message reaches its peak. We are saved through grace. There is hope! We are saved through Jesus' loving sacrifice. Be sure that the seeker has seen their need for grace, and this study about the grace of God will be powerful. It's also important for the seeker to understand their responsibility for Jesus' death. Establishing personal responsibility will later reap great gratitude and joy for Jesus' personal love and forgiveness.

Romans 3:21-27

Q: Why is Jesus' sacrifice so important? (All people are in complete need of grace for all have sinned. Christ is atonement [temple illustration] for the wrath we've earned. He redeems us [slavery illustration]; he justifies us [legal illustration].)

Romans 4:18-25

Q: What is credited to us because of Jesus death? (We have Jesus' righteousness credited to us via faith. Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification. He takes away our sins and gives us His righteousness!)

Romans 5:6-11

Q: What are we without Jesus' sacrifice? (Powerless; ungodly; God's enemies)

Q: How did God demonstrate his love for us? (Jesus died for us while we were at our worst, enemies of God, weak and sinful. His sacrifice changes all that and reconciles us to God.)

Galatians 2:20

Q: What did Paul say was his reason for no longer living for himself? (Paul said, *"...I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*)

Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself for us/you because He loves us/you.

Mark 14:26-15:41

Jesus chose to die for us. We are the reason Jesus faced death.

Q: Who killed Jesus? I did. You did.

Q: Why was Jesus willing to endure the incredible suffering He experienced? (Because He loves us/you!)

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Q: How should Jesus' love affect us/you? (The cross of Jesus should "compel" us/you to die to our/your sin and to live for Him.)

Acts 2:1-41

Within this first "Christian sermon" at Pentecost, Peter preached the message of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. When the people heard his message, *"...they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles...what shall we do?"*

Q: What does Peter tell the people to do in response to the sacrifice of Jesus?

Self-assessment question:

Q: How important is the grace of God and the redemption that came through of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

Q: How are you going to respond to grace of God personally?

Additional verses:

Isaiah 52-53

Colossians 2:13-14

John 3:16-21

1 Peter 2:21-25

A Medical Account of the Crucifixion

Hanging, electrocution, knee-capping, gas chamber: 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.²

No one is crucified today. For us the cross remains 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.*"³ 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. The effects would be worse as a result.

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: 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 included.

As the scourging proceeds, the heavy leather thongs produce first superficial cuts, than 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 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 parody, 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 around 75 to 125 pounds (approximately 35-55 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 6 inches long and 3/8 inch 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, and on and on.

This tortured activity became more and more difficult as Jesus' back was scraped against the upright post,⁴ as muscle cramps set in because of the inadequate respiration, and as exhaustion grew more severe. 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 quick death, it seems (Pilate was surprised to find Jesus already dead). A fatal cardiac arrhythmia, or perhaps cardiac rupture, are likely candidates.

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. Where on his side? The word chosen by John suggests the ribs, and if the soldier intended to make Jesus' death certain, a wound to the heart 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.⁵

NOTES

- 1) This is a simplified medical account of Jesus' crucifixion (an adaptation of the "Davis" version). Other medical reports have been written – all useful but usually rather technical. This account aims to be readable to the average reader. I created this adaptation, with the assistance of Alex Mnatzaganian, in December 1989.
- 2) Highly recommended: Martin Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* (London: SCM Press, Ltd: 1981).
- 3) The original version of our version of the Medical Account of the Crucifixion included these sentences: "Haematidrosis – bloody sweat – is rare, but well documented. Under great emotional stress, capillaries in the sweat glands can break, mixing blood in with the sweat. Luke's account is consistent with modern medical knowledge: Jesus was in emotional torment so intense that his body could not bear it." However, Luke only says that Jesus' sweat was like blood as it fell to the ground, not that it was mixed with blood. As disciples we must be careful not to overstate the case. There is no evidence that the early Christians preached the gore of the cross in an effort to sicken or shame those they were trying to convert.
- 4) In some locations, trees were plentiful, while in others upright posts needed to be fixed into the ground. It is quite possible that in the place where Jesus was crucified there was an abundance of trees, in which case the patibulum he and Simon of Cyrene carried was simply attached to a tree. Of course, whether Jesus was killed on a tree literally, or on a tree by metonymy (on the wood of a tree) is incidental to the point of the crucifixion.
- 5) Here follow sections from the original Cross study in the 2nd (1990) edition of *Shining Like Stars* that were not included in this version of the Medical Account. You may want to include some of these paragraphs in your own version of the study. The heart of our message will be lost if we rely on our own human wisdom, make baptism the main issue (1 Corinthians 1:17-18) or fail to focus on the cross. As Christians we should be moved by Christ's death. Make sure you have conviction when leading the study, and don't be afraid to show your emotions. As 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 makes clear, the cross is the heart of the gospel: we are saved because of the cross, since Christ died for our sins.
- 6) Analogies: (1) Soldier: A soldier dives onto a grenade about to explode. In dying, he saves his fellow-soldiers from certain death. (2) Train: The little boy was playing on the railroad tracks, unknown to his father. By the time the father noticed him, it was too late: he looked with horror as he saw the two passenger trains speeding towards each other from different directions; they were on a collision course! The only way to prevent the collision was to re-direct one of the trains off onto another track, exactly where his son was playing. The father had to act fast – it was only seconds before the collision – but he loved his son! What did he do? He threw the switch, saved the passengers, but in so doing sacrificed his little boy's life. God threw the switch for us. It was the only way to save us. He watched his son die for our sins. Yet most of the world carries on along its selfish course, unaware and unappreciative of the sacrifice that God made for us! Both analogies explain God's love for us in sending his son into the world to die for our sins.
- 7) The pain of the Cross: Matthew's account (shorter version, Mark 15:16-39): 26:36-46: Jesus is dreading the cross – prays for the right attitude; 26:66-68: beaten, mocked; 26:69-75: denied. Have you ever denied Jesus? (Luke 9:23); 27:26: flogged; 27:27-31: mocked, crowned with thorns, spat upon, beaten; 27:32: crucified; 27:46: abandoned by God. He bore not only the punishment due us, but also the actual guilt. He was separated from God (Isaiah 59:2, 2 Corinthians 5:21).
- 8) Our personal response to the Cross: 1 Peter 2:21-25, Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (Choose one): die to sins, live for righteousness! Share your own personal response (leader of study). Acts 2:22-38 (Rom 5:6 optional): i. You are a sinner; ii. You crucified Christ; iii. You don't deserve salvation. Concluding challenge: How should you respond? How are you going to respond?