

The Ugly Cross
November 17, 2013

The pictures in the news of the Philippines are horrible. They are more horrible than the other such catastrophes in the last decade in a significant way. In this catastrophe, the pictures show bodies of dead people lying in the debris, and along the streets. We see pictures or video of people walking by with masks or cloths over their nose to cut the smell of rotting flesh.

Death is gruesome. That is why executions have been public in most countries for centuries. The sights and smells of death are a deterrent to those who think of breaking the law.

There has not been a public execution in the United States in 77 years. This is a picture of the last one, in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1936. This was a hanging. Hangings have long been a part of our history. There have been other methods of capital punishment employed, but hanging served us the longest, beginning with the founding of our nation.

Crucifixion is an ancient form of execution. The Romans were not the first to use crucifixion. Other nations used it. It is even mentioned in the Law of Moses. At first crucifixion took place on a single upright pole. It was only later that a cross piece, in various shapes, was used.

But the Romans, having used it for several hundred years before the birth of Jesus, had developed it into a science. They could make it quick or make it last for several days. Often a person was flogged or scourged first, until blood flowed. Scourging was worse in that pieces of bone or metal were attached to the ends of the thongs. This was not just done out of cruelty but was designed to hasten death, if they wanted to shorten the time before death occurred.

The victim was then made to carry a beam of the cross to the site of the execution. At the site the prisoner was usually tied to the cross. Or if they desired a quicker death, they would nail the person to the cross. The cross was then lifted into place. Sometimes wooden pins or a small wooden block were attached to the upright post to provide something of a seat for the body. This seat made the death take longer.

Death could occur in two ways, depending on several factors. The first cause of death was shock, including the loss of blood and dehydration. This was most often the result when a small seat was added to the post, so the person's full weight was not on his arms and legs.

In the case where a seat was not used, the cause of death was usually suffocation. Because of the way the body was suspended, the persons lungs were shoved up into the chest cavity, making it almost impossible to breath. In order to get air the person would have to push himself up from his feet, causing much pain, but allowing the intake of air into the lungs. Eventually, being too tired to hold himself up on his feet, the body would sag back into the position that made breathing difficult. Then the process would repeat until the person was too exhausted to push up and breath.

Depending on the exact setup of the cross, with or without a seat, with or without a flogging or scourging, nailing or tying the hands and feet, the general health of the person beforehand, and the weather, death could occur as soon as 3-4 hours, or as long as 3-4 days.

Crucifixions were usually done in public places, and the body was left to rot, allowing the birds and dogs to feed on it, along with all the smells of death. Leaving the body up was a smelly, visual reminder against others pursuing similar crimes.

The Romans used a variety of cross shapes. There is no description in the Bible of what shape the cross of Jesus was. It could be shaped like a small letter t, a capital T, a plus sign, or an X shape. We do know Jesus was flogged and that nails were used to bind Him to the cross.

The word we use today for extreme pain, "excruciating", is derived from crucifixion and means "out of the cross". Crucifixion was torture whatever the circumstances.

Sometimes, if they desired to bring a quick death, they would crush the legs with an iron rod, or pierce the heart with a spear. In Jesus' case, the Jews did not want the bodies left up during Passover, and asked Pilate to bring an end to the crucifixion. One historian, recently quoted in the Washington Post, says that Pilate would not care what the Jews wanted. But I do not think this historian takes into account the potential for rioting with tens of thousands of visiting Jews in town for Passover. Riots by zealous Jews was always a danger.

Jesus knew about crucifixions before starting His ministry. Likely Jesus had seen a crucified body hanging on a cross in Judea or Galilee, rotting away. Possibly He had witnessed the act of crucifixion upon someone. If so, he had heard the sounds of violence and pain from the mouths of those being crucified.

Yet Jesus volunteered to die for us.

Romans 5:8 (NIV) But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. Yet, Jesus volunteered for the cross. Think of that this morning as we share the Lord's Supper, remembering His death, and all that He gained for us by the cross.

To get to the cross... Jesus had to successfully resist every temptation He ever faced in life. Giving in to even one temptation, committing one sin, would make His death on the cross worthless to us. So not only was Jesus tempted by whatever immediate gain a sin would bring, it also carried the attraction of escaping the cross. To avoid the cross all Jesus had to do was sin one time. Every temptation was that much stronger than you or I face. Yet He did so by keeping His focus on God.

We face temptation every day, many times a day. Paul writes of temptation in his letter to the Church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

I want to give you something this morning to help you deal with temptation. I suggest that one help for resisting temptation is to remind yourself daily and often of Jesus on the cross. In one of our hymns, titled "Go to Dark Gethsemane", the first verse carries this idea.

Go to Dark Gethsemane (#150)

Go to dark Gethsemane
You who feel the tempter's pow'r
Your Redeemer's conflict see
Watch with Him one bitter hour
Turn not from His griefs away
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.

Those first two lines are about remembering the cross to resist temptation. "Go to dark Gethsemane, you who feel the tempter's power." If you would remember the cross, picture the cross, remember what Jesus went through for you, it will help you resist temptation. Picture the ugly cross of Jesus and walk away from sin.

We have taken the cross, that ugly object of disgrace and death, and turned it into something beautiful. We make them of smooth polished wood, carved decoratively. Or we make them of gold or silver, sometimes adorned with gems. We have made the cross a beautiful decoration that people desire to wear, something to treasure.

Certainly it has beauty as a symbol of our eternal life, given as a free gift. But at the same time don't lose sight of the ugliness of the cross. Don't lose sight of the painful death of Jesus. Don't lose sight of what He went through for you.

If you could remember the ugly cross when you are tempted to sin, it will help you to resist sin. Remember what Jesus went through for you and walk away from sin.

Some years ago one of the children Sunday School classes gave me an ugly cross. It is two small nails, cement nails, my dad called them, though we used them to install hard wood flooring. These two nails are wired together into the shape of a cross. They are ugly. They are rough, not smooth, dirty, not shiny, not of uniform color. It is an ugly cross, just as the cross Jesus died on was ugly.

When you are tempted to sin, think of the cross. It will help you resist. **Remember the ugly cross each day and resist temptation.**

We have two simple things to help you remember the cross. One is a book mark, with a picture of an ugly cross made of nails. The other is a picture that stands up on its own. Set it up where you will see it each morning as you start your day. Set it up on your desk at work. Set it on the dash of your vehicle.

Let us never forget the cross. Let us never forget how Jesus died. Use it to gain strength over temptation.

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Jesus paid a terrible price for us. He was guilty of no sin. Because of His perfect God accepted His death as the ransom price for our sin. And as proof, God raised Him from the dead, the first of all those who will be resurrected to eternal life.

You too can be resurrected to eternal life by putting your faith in Jesus as your savior from sin and turn your life over to Him as your lord. God will forgive your sin and you will inherit eternal life when you die or Jesus returns, whichever comes first.