

Christ's Agony and Ecstasy - Death on a Cross

John 19:16, 28-30

The cross, comprised of wooden timbers and iron spikes, was the gas chamber or electric chair of the first century. It originated as a means of maximum torture. First used by the Persians, Phoenicians, and Carthaginians, and then adopted by the Romans, the cross was a grim instrument of death. One word could describe the experience of those who died by crucifixion: agony. Among other things, it was humiliating, tormenting, slow, public, and always terminal. Because the Jews of the first century lived under Roman rule, criminals declared guilty of capital crimes were crucified. In our moments together, let us follow the painful ritual through which our Savior passed - from the courts of Pilate to the cross on Golgotha.

ANALYSIS of the CRUCIFIXION

A. Scouring of the victim (John 19:1; Matt. 27:26). Scouring was commonly referred to as the "half-way death." Invariably, its subject slipped into shock, and some died. It was administered by a professional executioner known as a "lictor." His weapon was a flagellum, an instrument made of a short wooden handle to which were attached long strips of leather with bits of bone and metal sewn to the tips. The victim was stripped of all his clothing and bent over a low stone column, where he was tied with his face toward the floor. The normal sentence was 40 stripes, minus one for humanitarian purposes. I believe Jesus took all forty of them.

B. Mocking by the soldiers (Matt. 27:27-31). In the praetorium, Jesus stood before the soldiers naked; His body was a mass of swollen, bruised, and bloodied flesh. As the whole Roman cohort surrounded Him, they decided that if He was a king, then He should have a scepter, robe, and a crown. The scepter was a reed taken from a local plant; His robe came scarcely to His elbows; His crown was made of thorns measuring from 3/4 inch to 3 1/2 inches in length. They sarcastically hailed Him "king of the Jews," spitting on Him and beating Him about the head with a reed. In all this, He never reviled in return.

C. Walking to the site (John 19:17-22; Matt. 27:32-33). The soldiers redressed Jesus in His tunic, and while in a state of shock, He entered the streets to begin His walk to Calvary. Victims who made the walk were surrounded by four soldiers. In front of them walked their leader, a Centurion. Around the person's neck was draped a small sign naming his crime. The victim carried his own cross (i.e., the crossbeam) to the place of execution. Waiting at the death site was the vertical timber to which his crossbeam would be attached.

D. Nailing to the cross (John 19:18, 23a). This is the most hideous part of the episode. The victim was placed on his back with arms outstretched, and was mounted on the cross before it was placed in its upright position. To hold the person in place, the soldiers drove large iron spikes into the feet and wrists. It is reassuring to know that when we suffer, we are understood by a Savior who Himself suffered deeply and severely. Also, without His humanity, He could not have been a qualified priest on man's behalf; without His deity, He could not have been a qualified priest on God's behalf.

E. His unselfishness was exhibited. Jesus had been thirsty from the beginning. A careful study of the crucifixion reveals that the trials and execution together lasted twelve hours. During that time, He was scourged, buffeted, beaten, spit upon, stripped naked, and mocked. He was never even offered any rest or drink. We should note that He never asked for something to drink until the very end. All the way through, He had thought of others and of the fulfillment of prophecy. We will perhaps never hang on a

cross. However, take away some of our basic rights that we personally enjoy, and we soon become very irritable....even resentful and hostile. "After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, 'I am thirsty.'" John 19:28.

F. The picture. Isaiah 53 describes the picture of Christ on the cross as neither pretty nor palatable. It was never intended to be. Making Him appear beautiful, clothed, with a heavenly glow wrapped around His head, is only to cheapen reality. He hung for six hours between heaven and earth, limp, thin and bony; hollow-eyed and haggard, desolate and completely naked in His humiliation. He had been beaten with fists of men, and a crown of dry, piercing thorns had been forced onto His head. Due to the beating, and having His beard pulled out, the swelling around eyes, nose and mouth was so bad that He no longer looked like a man (Isa. 52:14 "His visage was marred more than any man, and His form than the sons of men.")

My friends, let's look back a little bit. After all this pain, and just shortly after being nailed to the cross, we hear Jesus speaking to His Father asking the Father to forgive all of those who had persecuted Him! Oh! What love He gave by grace. When the events climaxed, as He shouldered all our sins, He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" My beloved, this is very important, because this prayer of the Lord did not get an answer from the Father right then.

Matthew 27:45-46 "Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" That is, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" This cry is a fulfillment of Psalm 22. Christ at that moment was experiencing the abandonment and despair that resulted from the outpouring of divine wrath on Him as our sin-bearer. Jesus had become sin for the whole world, and God cannot look on sin! Dear one, the question is definitely answered for us in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son; that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Finally, just before His death, He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." (Luke 23:46). One more important thing to think about is that no one took the life of Jesus - He laid it down for the people. We must look at the proper sequence of events. When someone dies, they bow their head and then die, but with Jesus, the Bible says (Luke 23:46) that He gave up the spirit and then bowed His head. (It truly was finished! Paid in full!) Matthew 27:50 "He yielded up His spirit" - it was a voluntary act (see also John 10:18).

Matthew 27:51 The veil of the temple was the curtain that blocked the entrance to the most holy place (Exodus 26:33, Hebrews 9:3). When Jesus died, the veil was torn from top to bottom, which signified that the way into God's presence was now open to all through a new and living way - Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-22). The fact that it tore from top to bottom showed that no man had split the veil, but God did it.

Matthew 27:54 When the Centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" "Those with him" - these were probably men under his charge. Mark 15:39 says the Centurion was the one who uttered the words of confession, but he evidently spoke for his men as well. Their "fear" speaks of genuine faith. These men represent an answer to Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34. Their response contrasts sharply with the mocking taunts of verses 39-44.

Joseph, a rich man from Arimathea, went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. Then Joseph, along with Nicodemus (the one who first came to Jesus by night - John 3) together prepared the body for burial. They laid the body in Joseph's own tomb which had been carved out of rock. Then it was sealed by the Roman guards.

Matthew 28:2-6 A great earthquake. The second earthquake associated with Christ's death (see Matt. 27:51), but this one may have been confined to the immediate area around the grave. An angel supernaturally rolled back the stone from the door of the tomb, but not to let Jesus out (if He could rise from the dead, He would need no help in escaping an earthly tomb) - but to let the women and apostles in!

Here's a summary of the events of the resurrection, assembled from all four evangelists' (the gospel writers) accounts: finding the stone rolled away, the women entered the tomb, but found it empty. While they were still in the tomb, the angels suddenly appeared (Mark 16:5). The angel who spoke sent them to find Peter and the disciples to report that Jesus was risen (Matt. 28:7-8, Mark 16:7-8). The disciples were skeptical at first (John 20:4), but ran to where the tomb was, John arriving first, but Peter actually entering the tomb first (John 20:4-6). They saw the linen wrappings intact but empty, proof that Jesus was risen. Scripture describes at least ten distinct appearances of Christ between the resurrection and ascension. He appeared to the apostles when He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:3-11), and the next time He appears will be in glory (Matt. 24:30). Hallelujah!!

I close with a quote from my favorite preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, "The divinity of Christ finds its surest proof in His resurrection (Rom 1:4). Christ's sovereignty also depends on His resurrection (Rom 14:9). Again, our justification hangs on Christ's resurrection (Rom 4:25). Our very regeneration depends on His resurrection (1 Peter 1:3). And most certainly our ultimate resurrection rests here (Rom 8:11). The silver thread of resurrection runs through all the blessings, from regeneration onward to our eternal glory, and binds them together."

Resurrection is the REASON for the SEASON!

In His Service,
Pastor Tom