

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 21 - DEATH

(This message relies on the article in the Mar 21, 1986 issue of JAMA, Vol 255, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ" by William Edwards, MD; Wesley Gabel, MD; Floyd Hosmer, MS, AMI)

TEXT: MATTHEW 27:45-56 (ESV)

Death In Context

Today's message on the death of Jesus comes as part of a much larger sermon series. For those just joining us, you see this is part 21 of what will be 25 in all. Allow me to offer some context for how we've come to this particular message. This series traces the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry from Palm Sunday up through His resurrection on Easter. We have come to Good Friday—the day of Jesus' trail before Pilate, crucifixion and burial. The sum of the events of this day ended with Jesus' lifeless body being laid in a tomb, dead. Today we're going to talk specifically about how Jesus died.



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This message will touch on some explicit content concerning the physiology of the death Christ endured, and I say again to any who may be uncomfortable with this line of discussion that I totally understand if you'd rather not subject yourself or your children to this subject matter. My intent isn't to be gratuitous. Maybe a better word would be **cumulative**. I want to bring together all the factors spread out in the gospel narratives that contributed to His dying, and then put all of that in the greater context of why this death ultimately occurred.

Though He died on Friday afternoon, I want to go back two days to Wednesday to something we discussed earlier in this series. On Wednesday afternoon, Jesus dined in the home of a man called "Simon the Leper." There, a woman came with a flask of very expensive perfume (worth a year's wage) and began to pour it on Jesus' head. ^(Mt 26:7) The woman was Mary, the sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Though many disapproved of what appeared to be a waste of valuable resources, Jesus saw great kindness and honor in her gesture, telling His disciples she was preparing Him for burial.

It was a rich oil-based perfume that would have electrified the room with its fragrance as she poured in into Jesus' hair and beard. People are wired to associate scent with memories, and this scent must have become the scent of redemption for many because unless Jesus took a serious bath between Wednesday afternoon and His Last Supper in the upper room on Thursday evening, that oil would have remained strong on Him not only during that meal, but throughout His entire trial, crucifixion and burial. For all that was about the come His way, the scent of royalty filled every room He entered, and was agitated and re-released with every lash—no doubt even as He was buried.

As we delve into a difficult discussion of Jesus' death, remember Mary's perfume—the scent of redemption—lingers, which Jesus received as preparation for His burial. And let that remind you that throughout all this, Jesus *expected* to die. But also see from Matthew's account that while a Roman crucifixion was usually an event to showcase the power of Rome, Jesus' death made the earth tremble, the temple quake and even a soldier's faith spark into flame. The physiology was ordinary. But here something deeper and darker—and more glorious—was going on than anyone could imagine. It was extraordinary!

Matthew 27:45-56

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁵¹And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" ⁵⁵There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

After the Dust Settles

The sixth hour refers the sixth hour of the daytime. At high noon, darkness came over the land. Jesus had been on the cross at this point for three hours. That darkness remained for the duration of the brightest hours of the day as Jesus inched closer to the point of death. He said little, and what He did say was directed to His Father. In His final moments, He cried out, from David's Psalm, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It is the question that forms the importance of Easter. What was God doing through this death? Then with one final cry Jesus breathed His last and, as the King James says, gave up the ghost.

Then Matthew tells us something we'll save for another day—but the broad stoke of it is that at the moment of Jesus' death, the land of the living began to tremble and the land of the dead began to come alive. And it wasn't a metaphor. The soldiers at the scene felt the earth shake and were overcome—some even confessing they believed Jesus was the Son of God. The priests in the temple across town saw the curtain tear from top to bottom—the curtain that was used to separate the people from the presence of God. Rocks split. Graves opened in preparation for an exodus to come in three days when Christ Himself rose.

But for now, the reality for everyone watching after the dust settles is that on the cross hangs the lifeless, barely recognizable form of the man many knew as Jesus from Galilee. Crucifixion, from which we derive the word "excruciating," was designed to bring a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. Jesus' death, perfected and executed flawlessly by His Roman guard, was the result of a combination of physical exhaustion, bodily trauma and suffocation. Many aspects factored into His death.

Leading Up to the Crucifixion

Jesus' life as a preacher who walked everywhere He went tells us He was in good physical condition. He would've been mentally and emotionally sharp as well. But in the Upper Room Thursday night, He was very sorrowful because He knew the time had come for Him to die. (Jn 13:21) That sadness escalated as the night wore on so that when He later knelt in Gethsemane to pray, the sorrow was so great His sweat contained blood (Lk 22:44)—possibly referring to hematuria, where under extreme stress, blood vessels beneath the skin rupture and seep out the pores. Blood loss was minimal, but the skin became very tender.

From Supper to the Garden where He was arrested, Jesus had to walk approximately two miles. After His arrest, He was marched back into the city to face the Sanhedrin—another two miles or so. By the time He appeared before the Sanhedrin, He'd been awake for about 20 hours, with no rest in sight. He'd already burned any remaining calories from dinner, absorbed whatever fluids were in Him and walked at least four miles.

The Sanhedrin's intent to kill Jesus was set before a word was spoken. (Mt 27:1-2, Lk 23:20) The mental and verbal berating of their trial centered on a truth Jesus knew He could not explain: they wanted to kill Him for claiming to be the Messiah—which they saw as blasphemy—and His only defense was that He was, in fact, the Messiah. They found Him guilty, deserving of death, and turned Him over to the temple guards who blind-folded Jesus and took turns striking Him in the face with their fists and spitting on Him, taunting Him to prophecy who hit Him. (Mt 26:67-68, Mk 14:65, Lk 22:63-65) There's no telling how long this lasted, but Jesus was in their hands several hours as they waited for dawn.

At dawn, Jesus was brought to Pilate, the Roman governor, because only he could order crucifixion. (Jn 18:31) Pilate sentenced Jesus to be crucified. It began with a flogging. The Romans would strip their prisoner naked and tie him to a post with his back exposed. Then two soldiers would stand at either side and take turns flogging him with a flagellum—a short whip with bits of iron and bone woven into the ends. They'd whip him with downward, diagonal blows from his upper back to his lower thigh so that when they were through, his flesh was torn to ribbons, often sending the man's circulatory system into shock.

By the end of His flogging, Jesus was barely recognizable—"as one from whom men hide their faces." (Isa 53) The soldiers mocked this man claiming to be king by putting a purple robe on His shredded back and pressing a crown of thorns into His brow. Then they put a stick in His right hand as a mock scepter, and after feigning homage to Him, they took the scepter from His hand and hit Him in the head with it, while others spit on Him. (Mt 27:28-30, Mk 15:17-19) When they were through, they tore the robe off of His back, reopening any wounds that had begun to clot, (Mk 15:20) and put His own clothes back on Him. Before He was crucified, Jesus was already in serious, if not critical condition.

The Death of Jesus Christ

The Roman cross usually consisted of an upright post in the ground at the place of crucifixion and a crossbeam the convicted man carried to it. For some, the crossbeam rested on top of the post, but it appears Jesus' cross was of the style where the cross beam sat in a mortise and tenon joint, so a sign declaring the criminal's crime could hang above his head. The crossbeam weighed up to 150 pounds. By the time Jesus' procession began, He was unable to manage the weight, so Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross. (Mk 15:21)

Soldiers commanded by a centurion oversaw the procession. Some cleared a path for the convict and one carried a sign naming the crime. People often hurled insults and stones at these condemned men passing by to their deaths. At the crucifixion site, the crossbeam was laid on the ground and Jesus was stripped again, (Jn 19:23) except for possibly a loincloth, and laid face up across the beam. Removing His clothes and throwing Him down would've reopened the wounds on His back again.

His arms were stretched across the span of the beam and nails were driven into His wrists, between the radius and ulna in His forearm, avoiding the radial artery but passing through the median nerve, causing extreme pain, making the hand contract like a claw. With both hands nailed in place, He was lifted onto the post and His feet were nailed either directly into the post or into an angled rest fixed to it—both of which required Him to bend His knees, turning His legs to one side, contorting His torso. With hands and feet nailed in place, the soldiers fixed the sign they'd carried above His head so the world would know why this man died. Jesus' sign read, "King of the Jews." (Jn 19:19)

The soldiers remained to monitor the scene, usually dividing up the victim's personal effects as they waited. They cast lots for Jesus' clothes. (Mk 15:24) Death by crucifixion took anywhere from 3 hours to 3 days, depending on the condition of the victim. The weight of Jesus' body pulled down on His arms and shoulders, compacting His twisted torso. In this position, He could breathe in. But to breathe out, He'd have to straighten to relieve the tension on His diaphragm and the torque on the torso muscles used for exhalation. To do that, Jesus would have had to pull Himself up by His only contact points, His feet and hands—and the upward motion would have turned His wrists around the nails going through them. It hurt Him to breathe.

The result was shallow breathing, which limited oxygen to the blood, which caused cramping, spasms and fatigue, which made it that much harder to come up for air, creating a cycle of searing pain and suffocation. Jesus' shallow breathing is evident in His words from the cross, which were terse and brief. (Lk 23: 34, Lk 23: 43, Jn 19: 26-7, Mk 15: 34, Jn 19: 28, Jn 19: 30, Lk 23:46) Normally crucifixion took at least a day. If the soldiers wanted to hasten death, they would break victim's legs so he could only pull up for air with his arms. (Jn 19:31-32) But just six hours in, emptied of strength, Jesus became unable to breathe, and a combination of shock, asphyxia, blood loss and exhaustion converged into what doctors call a **major terminal event**—"Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last." (Mk 15:37) Time of death, 3:00PM. (Mk 15:34-37)

The Wonderful Worst Part

When Pilate heard Jesus had died at 3:00PM, he was surprised. (Mk 15:44) Jesus' short crucifixion (six hours) spoke to the brutality He'd endured over the past day. But as horrific as this description of Jesus' physical death has been, it is by no means the worst part of this span of time for Him. What Jesus took from crowds was pain. But what He bore from His Father was the debt of my sin. The transaction of the Cross was between God the Father and God the Son, where the Jesus absorbed God's wrath in my place. God lay on Christ what my sin deserved, such that if I believe this, I must confess; "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20) It was a sacrificial death—His life for mine. And though His death was once and for all many years ago, it was effective and the scent of redemption lingers still; "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph 5:2)