The Crucifixion of Christ

The 24 hour news cycle. Sensationalism rules. Flashing neon lights. Volume cranked up. Undue praise pours out on secular heroes and inflated disdain is heaped on villains.

Contrast the unbridled roar of modern media with the unimpassioned, restrained reports of the gospel writers on the betrayal, trials, barbs, beating, torture, and murder of God’s innocent Lamb.

Jesus' positive impact on His countrymen -- concentrated in a whirlwind, three-year ministry -- merited celebrations in the streets in His honor, but the only parades with Jesus were merciless mock fests: first from trials before his highbrow Jewish enemies, to Pilate the Roman governor, to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, back to Pilate, to the flogging by the Roman soldiers, back to Pilate, and ultimately to Golgotha to die on a Roman cross as if He were a heinous criminal.

The orchestrated mayhem surrounding the Messiah’s final hours bore Satan’s fingerprints. The gospel backstory, though, is that God used, for His own purposes, the intense hatred of Satan and his militant accomplices to show His even more extraordinary love for man. The Spirit explains in 1 Corinthians 2:7-8, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

This morning we will probe the details surrounding The Crucifixion of Christ, after a song...

What exactly happened to Jesus? The apostle John sums up the days’ brutalities with remarkable brevity.

John 19:1, “So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him.”

John 19:17-18, “Then they took Jesus ... to a place called ... Golgotha, where they crucified Him...”

Endearing disciple, intimate friend, son of Zebedee and Salome, fisherman, brother of James, is this all you will say about the unrelenting violence unleashed on your best friend for a period of six hours?

His reporting of the day’s events was the work of the Spirit, not Spielberg, you see. John had a job to do and it would be done right. He was not to pour out unfiltered the sights, the sounds, and his guttural reaction to pure evil. Just the facts! This, of course, adds legitimacy to his testimony.

Lee Strobel interviewed Alexander Metherell in The Case for Christ. Metherell, the research scientist, medical doctor, engineer, author of an array of publications like Aerospace Medicine, The Physiologist, Biophysics Journal, and Scientific American, has worked with the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute of the National Health Institute and is board certified in diagnosis by the American Board of Radiology. Metherell speaks convincingly on the impact of the abuse Jesus received.

The stage is set, if subdued, with the sleepless and highly stressful night. Jesus’ keen awareness of the coming convergence of prophecies creates great strain in Gethsemane. He knew not only what He would witness, but He also had a view to the unseen realm; He knew not only of the wholesale human rejection, but also the forsaken-by-the-Father feeling. His human dread led to the prayer in the garden (Luke 22:42-43), “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.”

Even after “an angel appeared ... from heaven, strengthening Him,” the distress so boiled within that (Luke 22:44), “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

I’ve had considerable anxiety on occasion, but nothing like this. Metherell calls this hematidrosis an “uncommon medical condition associated with a high degree of psychological stress.” He adds: “...[S]evere anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. As a result, there’s a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out tinged with blood.”

Metherall says further, “What this did was set up the skin to be extremely fragile so that when Jesus was flogged by the Roman soldier the next day, his skin would be very, very sensitive.”

The cool, night air may have also given Jesus chills (Edwards).

The severe mental and emotional strain soon gives way to physical cruelty. A series of trials before Jews and Gentiles led Pilate to offer a compromise to appease (he thought!) Jesus’ Jewish enemies. The Spirit says simply in John 19:1, “So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him.” How gruesome was this act alone!

Edwards writes,

“The usual instrument was a short whip ... with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals.... For scourging, the man was stripped of his clothing, and his hands were tied to an upright post... (S) The back, buttocks, and legs were flogged either by two soldiers or by one who alternated positions. The severity of the scourging depended on the disposition of the lictors and was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death....As the Roman soldiers repeatedly struck the victim’s back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and sheep bones would cut into the skin and subcutaneous tissues. 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...."

Metherell reports, “The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts.... A third century historian ... Eusebius described a flogging by saying, ‘The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.”
Imagine being hit ONCE by a brawny Roman soldier with such an instrument. (Whack! Grimace.) He would inflict great pain if he had only a leather whip, but this beating was much worse.

Edwards adds, “It is not known whether the number of lashes was limited to 39, in accordance with Jewish law. [Roman soldiers would not be inhibited by Jewish regulations. - BH]” Try to imagine. Whack! Whack! Whack!

This flogging was no accident. Isaiah 53:5, “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.” How is that for prophetic specificity?

Stripes! Jesus CHOSE to take that whippin’ for me. He did NOTHING wrong. It would be extreme to receive even one lash myself for violating some civil law. In addition, I would take a lash on the back for my wife, my son, or my daughter, but how could I endure even a single lash for someone I didn’t know. How about taking one for a man who did me wrong or created some violent act?

Imagine taking stripe after stripe with the authorities declaring name after name of evildoer on whose behalf you were taking a whipping. Unbearable anguish.

We’d cry out, “Stop! Unjust!” Jesus did nothing wrong; He was sinless. The scourging wasn’t just for the sins of Mary, Peter, James, and John. He took that beating for Judas Iscariot, for Saul of Tarsus who will persecute the church, for Annas and Caiphas (the Chief Priests), for Pilate, for the soldiers who whipped him, the soldiers who spit on Him, mocked Him, and nailed Him to the cross.

John 3:16, “For God so loved the WORLD that He gave His only begotten son that WHOSOEVER believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” That’s everybody!

The Holy Spirit teaches that the “Lord is not willing that ANY should perish, but that ALL should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9). By Jesus’ stripes, He offered spiritual healing to “the world,” to “any,” and to “all.” That’s Bible and that’s amazing grace!

Jesus sought no shortcuts, but we see why Jesus had no stamina to carry the cross all the way to Golgotha. During the scourging, excessive blood loss often produced hypovolemic shock.

Metherell explains, “This does four things. First, the heart races to try to pump blood that isn’t there; second, the blood pressure drops, causing fainting or collapse; third, the kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left; and fourth, the person becomes very thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume.” No wonder Christ cried out on the cross, “I thirst!”

After the whipping, the soldiers added insult to injury with a mock coronation cemetery, placing a scarlet robe on his back, a thorn-crown on his head, and a staff for a scepter in his right hand. They spit on Jesus and struck him on the head.
No food. No water. No sleep. This was only the prelude to the cross, but we see already the weakness of skeptics who deny Jesus’ death as if Jesus had merely been in a school age skirmish.

Pilate miscalculated; the scourging did NOT satisfy the Jewish leaders’ blood-thirsty hate. They stirred up the crowd to demand that Jesus be crucified. Pilate lacked the political will to do more than say, “I find no fault in Him,” and give in to their will.

Of course, the cross is central to the gospel, so Satan must attack it. In his crucifixion rewrite titled Passover Plot, Hugh Schonfield proposes that “Jesus contrived to be arrested the night before the Passover, fully aware that he would be nailed to the cross the following day, but taken down before the onset of the Sabbath in accordance with Jewish law. He would survive the agony of but three hours on the cross.” Bizarre!

Schonfield has Joseph of Arimathea and an unnamed friend arrange for Jesus to be given “not the traditional vinegar but a drug that would render him unconscious and make him appear dead. He would then be cut down from the cross in a deathlike trance, removed ... to the tomb where he would be nursed back to health...” With this lie, the empty tomb could be explained without the resurrection.

Hanegraaf cites the approval of Time magazine and Bible scholars like William Barclay, but offers his evaluation: “This despite the fact that Schonfield ... admitted that it is ‘an imaginative reconstruction of the personality, aims and activities of Jesus,’ in which such characters as the unidentified Jew emerge out of thin air” (Resurrection, p. 4-5).

Don’t be shocked by such blasphemous foolishness. The devil is alive and well! Remember Jesus said in John 8:44, “You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.”

A series of similar attacks on Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection include the Muslim diversion the son of a Muslim imam shared with me in Nashville. He insisted that God made Judas look like Jesus so Jesus escaped in the garden while Judas was captured, convicted, and crucified in His place. Muslims champion the so-called Gospel of Barnabas as the true account, no doubt, largely because it presents the same bogus story.

Dr. Norman Geisler points out:

1. Longsdale and Ragg write in their introduction to the Oxford edition of the Gospel of Barnabas that its original writing was closer to the sixteenth than the first century.
2. “[T]here is no original language manuscript evidence for its existence.... By contrast, the New Testament books are verified by more than 5300 Greek manuscripts that begin over the first three centuries.”
3. “This gospel is widely used by Muslim apologists today, yet there is no reference to it by any Muslim writer before the fifteenth or sixteenth century,” https://www.jashow.org/articles/guests-and-authors/dr-norman-geisler-2/is-there-a-%E2%80%9Cgospel-of-barnabas%E2%80%9D/
4. “No ... teacher of the Christian church ever quoted it from the first to the fifteenth centuries, despite the fact that they quoted every verse of every book of the New Testament except 11” (Geisler, General Introduction to the Bible).

5. “In fact, no Muslim should accept the authenticity of The Gospel of Barnabas since it clearly contradicts the Qur’an’s claim that Jesus was the Messiah. It claims, “Jesus confessed, and said the truth; ‘I am not the Messiah.... ’ (sects. 42, 48). The Qur’an repeatedly calls Jesus the “Messiah” [the “Christ”] (cf. suras 5:19, 75).” https://www.jashow.org/articles/guests-and-authors/dr-norman-geisler-2/is-there-a-%E2%80%9CGospel-of-barnabas%E2%80%9D/

This fraud is a typical counterfeit of the true New Testament message. What happened on the cross? Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter provide the truth! First century men knew crucifixion; they witnessed it.

Persians, Seleucids, Carthaginians, and Romans practiced crucifixion for six centuries before and about four centuries after Christ (Encyclopedia Britannica). Thankfully, we have not.

After the flogging, the one condemned carried the 75-125-pound crossbeam to the crucifixion site outside the city (Edwards, et al). The victim was naked or nearly so. The arms were yanked until the shoulders were dislocated and five-to-seven-inch nails were hammered through the wrists at the median nerve – the largest nerve going out to the hand. The word excruciating (out of the cross) came from this level of agony.

Metherell explains that this pain was like a blow to your elbow that strikes your funny bone -- only the nails in Jesus’ hands didn’t just HIT the nerve, they completely CRUSHED it. Impossible to keep silent through this.

Then a similar wound would be made with one spike right through the middle of the feet. “A ledge inserted about halfway up the upright shaft gave some support to the body... Death ultimately occurred through a combination of constrained blood circulation, organ failure, and asphyxiation as the body strained under its own weight.”

When the condemned was laid to the ground on his back for his hands to be nailed, the flesh torn from the flogging would be aggravated and soiled. Each breath would run His back against the rugged lumber keeping the blood oozing and streaming through the crucifixion. All of this drew insects and perhaps birds to add another form of misery.

We take breathing for granted, but it was hard work on the cross. Edwards writes in the Journal of the AMA, “The weight of the body, pulling down on the outstretched arms and shoulders, would tend to fix the intercostal muscles in an inhalation state and thereby hinder passive exhalation. Accordingly, exhalation was primarily diaphragmatic, and breathing was shallow. It is likely that this form of respiration [breathing] would not suffice and that hypercarbia would soon result [where excessive levels of carbon dioxide in the blood]. The onset of muscle cramps ... due to fatigue and hypercarbia, would hinder respiration [breathing] even further.”

Jesus would have to push his feet against the nail, flexing His elbows and adducting the shoulders to lift himself up to exhale. In the process, the pain would spike in the nerves by the nails, on the back against the wood, in the cramping muscles on the arm. Eventually, exhaustion would lead to asphyxiation and death.
Also contributing to death would be dehydration, blood loss, stress-induced arrhythmias, and congestive heart failure. By breaking the legs of the thieves beside Jesus, the soldiers hastened their death by asphyxiation. By this time, Jesus was already dead. Rather than break Jesus legs that prophesy would be fulfilled that not a bone would be broken” (John 19:31-36), “one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.”

And Jesus died. He died for the world, but more importantly, Jesus died for YOU. And what does He expect in return? Only that you live FOR him and that you live “in Him.”

When you sin, you die spiritually. You are separated from God and Jesus says in John 3:5, “…unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” We can help you today! Stay with us to learn how to get a free copy of this message, after our song....

We are glad you joined us this morning. Tune in every Lord’s Day and then join us for worship at one of the congregations listed shortly. Call or write for a copy of #1350, “The Crucifixion.” Visit LettheBibleSpeak.com to view videos, hear podcasts, and read transcripts of three hundred Bible messages. You may also request a free Bible study course by mail. We close with the words the apostle Paul issued in Romans 16:16, “the churches of Christ salute you.” Until next week, goodbye and God bless!