

Why Did Jesus Have To Die By Crucifixion?

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Crucifixion shows up in movies depicting Christ or people in Christ's time meeting horrible deaths: *The Robe*, *King of Kings*, *Quo Vadis?*, *Spartacus*, *Ben Hur*. These movies never even come close to depicting the horror of crucifixion. Modern capital punishment seems humane, almost gentle, in comparison to the real thing.

Movie producers usually depict a "cross" as a T-shaped implement. Over the years, the Church of God has often written about "the Cross," many times to debate whether Jesus died on a traditional cross or on an upright stake or pole in the ground. A few in God's church would not even utter the word "cross," replacing it with the word "stake" or "tree" instead. Perhaps we focused on the technical data too much, as we tried to distance our Savior from any pagan symbol or shape. Maybe we began to lose sight of the larger picture: that our Savior had to die for us.

Our English Bible translations say He died on a "cross." The original Greek word used is *stauros*. In researching the topic, we find some experts report that a *stauros* was simply a stake, pole or post upon which the victim was either nailed, strapped or impaled. *Strong's Concordance* (#4716) defines it as "a stake or post . . . a pole or cross." *Vine's Expository Dictionary* takes the much stronger opinion that the "cross" the Romans crucified Jesus on was nothing like today's crucifix, but just an upright beam. Several Bible dictionaries take both sides—that the "cross" was originally an upright beam with cross beams added later, and they give supporting evidence. The exact shape is unimportant. A stake both with and without a cross bar is used in pagan symbolism. Is a church steeple any less pagan because it has no cross bar? It is still a phallic symbol.

Without a doubt, the "cross" we know today looks very much like the symbol used by worshipers of Tammuz. It is equally certain that we should **not** be using a "cross" as a part of worship. (Request our reprint article, "The Cross: Christian Banner or Pagan Relic," May, 1996; see also Vine's article "cross, crucify.")

The Greater Issue

However, we must not forget the greater issue: Our Savior died a most horrible death on a *stauros* or "cross." For me. For you.

The Romans made an art form of crucifixion as a means of capital punishment after borrowing the idea from the Greeks and Phoenicians. The Babylonians, Persians and Assyrians also used various forms of crucifixion, including impaling. The Jews thought it a most disgusting form of death. It was gory and very painful, often lasting for days. Roman citizens were usually exempted from crucifixion; they were beheaded for capital crimes.

In Jesus' day, crucifixion was considered so gruesome that it was reserved for slaves and the worst criminals or enemies of the state. Death usually took days unless the victim had been severely beaten or scourged first, which was often the case. To maximize the impact, crucifixions often occurred along public highways or other very visible areas, as lessons for all of what would happen to enemies of the state or incorrigibles.

The Romans usually left the bodies to rot or be eaten by scavengers. No doubt Jesus had seen the remains of many crucifixions as He traveled up and down Galilee and Judea. He knew He would someday experience it firsthand.

Why did Jesus have to die *that* way? Was there not a more humane way for Him to die for our sins? Were He an ordinary man, such questions might be relevant, but to be our Savior, He had to die in such a way. The Father had planned for specifically this type of execution because it so perfectly depicts so many things necessary for a full comprehension of sin and its horrors.

Death by Execution

Today we execute criminals by a variety of means: lethal injection, gas, firing squad, hanging or electric chair. In Jesus' time, the Romans preferred crucifixion.

A primary factor in Jesus' death is that it was substitutionary. For each sin we commit, we earn the death penalty. This penalty cannot be paid by dying a natural death of old age, by accident or by disease, for this is the way everyone dies as a matter of course. Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed for men to die once." If "merely" dying any old way were the payment for sin, idolaters, murderers, rapists, thieves, liars, adulterers and other sinners would be completely absolved of their sins upon their deaths. Cleared of all guilt by death, they would legally qualify for entrance into God's Kingdom.

However, we must remember the rest of verse 27: ". . . but after this the judgment." Thus, even after a person's physical death, he is brought under judgment. This means the penalty for sin is something more than "just" death. Verse 22 helps to clarify this: "Without shedding of blood there is no remission." Sin cannot be forgiven until someone pours out his blood to cover the transgression. The penalty for sin is therefore death by execution.

So, as a substitutionary sacrifice, Jesus had to die the way we would have, by execution. He could not have paid the penalty for our sins by dying any way other than by execution. He could not have died by suicide or even "euthanasia," as these forms of death would have been sin, disqualifying Him as Savior. He would then have had to die for His own sin.

Remember also that Jesus' death resulted from a pronouncement of Pilate, when he handed Jesus over "to be crucified" (John 19:13-16; Matthew 27:26). Though Pilate literally washed his hands of the whole affair by saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it" (Matthew 27:24), he made the judgment and sentenced Him to death.

Of course, Jesus was not guilty of any crime or sin. *Our* sins brought on us the death penalty. In taking the penalty on Himself, Jesus had to die by execution, and crucifixion was Rome's preferred means.

The Shame of Crucifixion

God also allowed His Son to suffer crucifixion because it was a very shameful way to die. It was the death of criminals and incorrigibles, for those considered "the scum of the earth." No one in Jesus' day would have bragged that his uncle had been crucified any more than we would be proud of a relative who was executed by electric chair. To make matters worse, Jesus was crucified between two robbers (Matthew 27:38). The typical passerby would have judged Jesus guilty by association.

Why and how does shame enter the picture? Why did Jesus have to die a shameful death? Sin *causes* shame. Sin *is* shameful. Jesus died a shameful death to depict the shame brought on by our sins. It is shameful to be known as a thief, a pervert, an adulterer, a liar or a murderer. It *should be* shameful to be known as an idolater or one who takes God's name in vain, breaks the Sabbath or disrespects his parents. Sin does not make us look good, nor does it make our family proud of us. ***Sin is shameful***. We should be ashamed to sin!

Crucifixion was shameful not only as a *penalty*, but also as a *process*. In most cases, the victim was stark naked—allowed little or no loin cloth. The Bible in many places discusses the shame of nakedness (Isaiah 47:3; Revelation 3:18; 16:15). Imagine being a sinless person, having committed no crime or sin, yet exposed to all who passed by. Being a modest man, Jesus was ashamed to have to be exposed to His mother and the other women, the apostle John and a multitude of spectators, male and female. What humiliation our Savior endured for us!

The theme of "the *shame* of the cross" is discussed in Scripture. Notice two passages in Hebrews.

. . . looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him *endured the cross, despising the shame*, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2)

. . . if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they *crucify* again for themselves the Son of God, *and put Him to an open shame*. (6:6)

The Agony of Crucifixion

Jesus also had to die a death that was excruciatingly painful. Why? To depict the horrible pain that sin causes. It would not have served God's purpose if He had died a painless death. The picture would have been incomplete.

Any criminal of that time would have despaired to learn he was to be crucified. Crucifixion was not only an execution, but also a method of torture. The Romans usually gave the victim an excruciating scourging first. Jesus was no exception. Before He ever touched His cross, He was scourged, beaten and insulted.

Over the years we have heard quite a bit about the Roman lictor, the soldier charged with dispensing this dreaded punishment. He used a whip, often with imbedded pieces of metal, bone or other sharp objects. Romans did not limit their lictors to the Israelite practice of "forty stripes save one," nor to striking just the victim's back. He would let the whip strike and wrap around every inch of the person's body until he was within an inch of death.

The prophet Isaiah prophesies how Jesus appeared after the scourging: "Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage [*appearance*, margin] was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men" (Isaiah 52:14). He goes on to say that He was "wounded [*pierced through*, margin] for our transgressions, He was bruised [*crushed*] for our iniquities" (53:5). Is it no wonder that the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:8, "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, *even the death of the cross*."

Imagine yourself in Christ's situation, with the skin flayed off so that you could count all your bones. Add to that the searing pain of huge nails being pounded into your hands and ankles as soldiers

pinned you to the stake. Now add the emotional pain of being denied and forsaken by all your friends. Thank God for the many *women* who stood by Jesus at that moment of horror—Mary His mother, Mary Magdalene and others (Matthew 27:55-56). On top of everything else, He had to endure the taunts and ridicules of those for whom He was dying.

Then Jesus experienced yet another horror for the first time: being forsaken by God in heaven. God dumped all the obnoxious sins of the world on Jesus and had to turn His back on Him who became sin for us (Isaiah 53:6, 10-12; I Peter 2:24). How hauntingly mournful it must have sounded to hear Jesus cry out, "'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46-47). At this point, Jesus learned what it felt like to be cut off from God because of sin.

The pain grew so great that when Jesus said He thirsted, the Roman soldiers at the foot of His cross offered Him a brew of "vinegar" or sour wine mixed with myrrh as a sedative (John 19:28-29; Mark 15:23). Jesus refused it, knowing He had to suffer pain as part of the picture of what sin does in our lives: *causes a lot of gruesome pain!*

After a while on the stake, the condemned person found it difficult to breathe. He could help himself a little by bracing his body upward with his legs and knees, but once he could no longer do this, he slowly died by asphyxiation. To hasten death, the Roman executioners would sometimes break the victim's legs with a club—which they did to the two robbers (John 19:31-32). When they came to Jesus, they found Him already dead and so did not break any of His bones (verse 33; Psalm 34:20).

Jesus did not die of a broken heart, as Protestants believe. He bled to death from dozens of wounds from the scourging, the spikes driven through his limbs and a gaping spear wound in His side, out of which flowed blood and water. He truly poured out his blood like water to cover our sins (Psalm 22:14; Ephesians 1:7; I John 1:7).

Jesus gasped, "It is finished" (John 19:30), and finally to the Father, who gave Him to us because He loved us so much, our Savior prayed, "Into your hands I commend My spirit" (Luke 23:46). So Jesus died with a quiet confidence that He had finished the work His Father had sent Him to do.

Appreciating the Crucifixion

So Jesus died, but not just any death. He died the death of a convicted criminal, put to death by execution in the most painful and shameful way man could devise. He had to die this way to remind us that sin is not painless. It is not shameless. Sin does not remain hidden in a corner.

The crucifixion showed the horror, the ugly and disgusting shame, the heaviness and the suffering caused by sin. All sin. Every sin. Even "tiny" sins. Even "secret" sins. Your sins. My sins. All of them.

It is so easy to sin and think, "I can repent later." This comes perilously close to taking the crucifixion for granted as we put Jesus to open shame, pain and a slow gruesome death. Let's understand and appreciate what He did for us more than ever. Perhaps it can help us become more aware of sin and more determined to resist it!

At the moment the sharp point of the Roman spear sliced open Jesus' side, the veil of the temple tore in two (Matthew 27:50-51). Jesus, our High Priest, opened the way for all of us—any time we wish—

to enter the Holiest of all, the very presence of the Father. The Captain of our salvation gave us this access by His torn body and shed blood to cleanse us of all sin (Hebrews 10:19-22). The cross or stake became the symbol of what He did for us: die in our stead so we can be forgiven of all sin.

After His resurrection, as Mary Magdalene was about to embrace Him (John 20:17), Jesus made a very meaningful comment: "I am ascending to My Father *and your Father* , and to My God and your God." Wow! Because of what He had just done, this statement was possible. We now have the same Father Jesus has! And we gained one awesome big brother—Jesus Christ!

As we drink the wine and eat the broken bread this Passover, let us praise God in gratitude for giving us His Son, and thank Jesus who willingly gave Himself in our behalf. We can now appreciate more than ever why He had to be crucified.

Was Jesus Stabbed Before or After He Died?

Diligent study of the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus Christ can lead to a host of questions, especially about the timing of events. One question bound to surface concerns the Roman soldier who "pierced His side with a spear" (John 19:34). Did this occur before or after His death? A simple reading through the gospel accounts would seem to answer this question conclusively. The three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) do not mention the incident, while John addresses it *after* Jesus "gave up His spirit" (John 19:30). Where is the controversy?

The contention arises from part of a verse that is not even present in the King James and many other translations of the Bible. Though present in a few of the most ancient manuscripts, several words are left out of Matthew 27:49: "And another took a spear, and thrust it into His side, and out came water and blood." The Moffatt and Fenton translations are among the few translations that include this additional material.

What makes it controversial is where these words appear: just *before* Jesus "yielded up His spirit" (verse 50). Which is right?

They both are! The problem is in the translation of John 19:34, a verse that appears in the context *after* Jesus' death: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out." So when did this spear thrust occur, before or after Jesus died?

The culprit is a common Greek tense called the aorist tense. Spiros Zodhiates, in *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, explains:

The Aorist Tense is used for simple, undefined action. In the indicative mood, the aorist tense can indicate punctiliar action (action that happens at a specific point in time) in the past. . . . With few exceptions, whenever the aorist tense is used in any mood other than the indicative, the verb does not have any temporal significance. In other words, *it refers only to the reality of an event or action, not to the time when it took place.* (Emphasis ours.)

Modern translators, however, often render the aorist tense into English as simple past tense. Granted, most of the time this is correct, but in John 19:34 it is likely an error. The

apostle John is describing an event that he had witnessed and giving it as proof that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies of Psalm 34:20 and Zechariah 12:10. Concerned about making a theological point, he cares little about *when* it had specifically happened, only that *it had truly happened?*, fulfilling the prophecies.

The "missing" portion of Matthew 27:49, then, supplies the timing: The soldier thrust his spear into Jesus' side before He died. Thus, a more accurate English translation of John 19:34 would be, "But one of the soldiers *had pierced* His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water *had come out*."

Why do we think this is correct?

1. Matthew 27:50 records that Jesus suddenly "cried out again with a loud voice" and died. The spear thrust, acting as a *coup de grace*, neatly accounts for His scream of pain, as well as His quick death.
2. Dead bodies do not bleed. Doctors jump through hoops trying to explain how "water and blood" could pour out of a corpse, saying that "in rare instances" such a thing is possible. However, if the spear thrust was pre-death, no such explanation is necessary.

Jesus was stabbed *before* He died.