

113. The King on the cross

March 4, 2018

If you had a crucifix on your neck back in time two thousand years ago in Israel or any Roman territories, the people around you might look at you with very strange expressions on their faces. Because back then, the cross was not a symbol of faith, but of failure; not of morality, but of lawlessness; not of respect, but of unspeakable shame.

Back then, the cross was not polished jewelry, rather it was a mere tool for execution of death row prisoners. The execution on the cross was done outside of the city, overlooking the garbage dumps of the city; made of rough-cut timbers and iron spikes. The cross has a synonym with the French Guillotine, a hangman's rope, and now electric chair or lethal injection.

For Jesus who had no room in the inn at His birth, and He had nowhere to lay His head during His earthly ministry, but now the cross was a final stop of rest.

A. SCRIPTURAL PREDICTION

This final course of Jesus' earthly ministry was not an accident, nor was it a mishap. It was a part of God the Father's Master Plan to save condemned humankind from eternal damnation and it was prophesied throughout the OT. Written centuries before Christ, several passages in the OT clearly prophesy the Messiah's Crucifixion. Here is one:

Psalm 22:12-18 Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. 13 They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion. 14 I am poured out like water, And all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; It has melted within Me. 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, And My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. 16 For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; 17 I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. 18 They divide My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.

Another prophetic text for Jesus' crucifixion is in Isaiah 53. It describes the misery, torture, pain of God's Servant, and even mentions being crucified with sinners.

B. THE SAVIOR'S DEATH MARCH

John 19:17 And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha,

Regarding the crucifixion, Roman philosopher Cicero said, "It was the most cruel and shameful of all punishments. Let it never come near the body of a Roman citizen; nay, not even near his thoughts or eyes or ears."

Crucifixion probably had its origin among the Persians and Phoenicians, but it was the Romans who perfected the use of it. They perfected it as a form of torture and capital punishment that was designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. No Roman citizen could be crucified, though there were exceptions. This mode of capital punishment was reserved for the worst kind of criminals, particularly those who promoted insurrection. Today, we think of the cross as a symbol of glory and victory; but in Pilate's day, the cross stood for the lowest kind of rejection, shame, and suffering. It was Jesus who made the difference.

Crucifixion was the most shameful and painful way to execute a criminal. Like all victims of crucifixion, Jesus was forced to carry the wood He would hang upon. The weight of the entire cross was typically 300 pounds. The victim only carried the crossbeam, which weighed anywhere from 75 to 100 pounds.

Driving the nail through the wrists would sever the large median nerve – this stimulated nerve would produce excruciating bolts of fiery pain in both arms, and could result in a claw-like grip on the victim's hands.

Beyond the excruciating pain, the major effect of crucifixion hindered normal breathing. The weight of the body, pulling down on the arms and shoulders, would tend to fix the respiratory muscles in an inhalation state, and make exhalation very difficult. The lack of adequate breathing would result in severe muscle cramps, which would hinder breathing even further. To get a good breath, one would have to push against the feet, and flex the elbows, pulling from the shoulders. Putting the weight of the body on the feet would produce searing pain, and flexing of the elbows would twist the hands hanging on the nails. Lifting the body for a breath would also painfully scrape the back against the rough wooden post. Each effort to get a proper breath would be agonizing, exhausting, and lead to death sooner.

How bad was crucifixion? We get our English word 'excruciating' from the Roman word 'out of the cross.'

The most significant thing about Jesus' sufferings was that He was not, in any sense, the victim of circumstances. He was completely in control.

John 10:18 no one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself.

It is terrible to be forced to endure such torture, but to freely choose it out of love is remarkable. Can we ever doubt God's love for us again? Has He not gone to the most extreme length to demonstrate it?

C. CARRYING A CROSS FOR JESUS

Matthew 27:32 Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.

Like many other thousands of Jews who came to Jerusalem from other nations to celebrate the Passover feast, Simon traveled over 800 miles from Cyrene, the current Lybia in North Africa and now he was being humiliated to carry a cross beam for a criminal who was condemned to die. But in reality, he was carrying that wooden beam for Jesus. What a privilege for any Christian to have!

The Gospel of Mark referred to Simon as though the people reading his Gospel would recognize him: "the father of Alexander and Rufus" in Mark 15:21. Apparently these two sons were well-known members of the church, because the name of Rufus was mentioned in Romans 16:13. It seems likely that this humiliating experience resulted in Simon's conversion as well as in the conversion of his family. Simon came to Jerusalem to sacrifice his Passover lamb, and he met the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for him.

It was not surprising that our Lord could not carry the cross beam due to no food, no water, and all the tortures. Simon Peter boasted that he would go with Jesus to prison and even to death, but it was Simon of Cyrene, not Simon Peter, who came to the aid of the Master.

If I could go back in a time machine to be a part of ancient history, I would choose to be Simon the Cyrenian on the way to Golgotha, the road called "Via Dolorosa," so that I could carry the cross beam for Jesus even a few steps.

As born again Christians, Jesus wants us to deny ourselves and carry our cross daily. Does He mean to drag literal wooden beams everywhere we go? No, our Father God wants us to be more like Jesus who kept His commandments and abided in His love by denying and crucifying our carnal desires daily.

Are you one of those faithful followers of Jesus Christ who denies yourself and carries your cross daily? If you are, the Lord will bless you immensely.

D. THE FIRST GOSPEL TRACT BY PILATE

John 19:19-22 Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. 20 Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. 21 Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'He said, "I am the King of the Jews.'"" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

By combining all four Gospel records as we are doing now, we arrive at the full accusation that was put over His head: "This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." The Jewish rulers did not approve of what Pilate wrote, but for once the governor did not change it. In one sense, this title proved to be the first "Gospel tract" ever written. As a result of this first Gospel tract, one of the thieves who was crucified with Him believed that Jesus was the Savior and a King.

A shrewd politician like Pilate understood the reason why the Jewish religious rulers hated Jesus so much – envy. Pilate wanted to have the last word in against them. He knew that his placard would insult and embarrass them, and that is exactly what he wanted, not because he believed in Christ.

With so much change in topography around Jerusalem since A.D. 70 when emperor Titus and his Roman military destroyed the city, it is impossible to determine the exact location of Golgotha or the Lord's route to the cross. If you go to Israel, you will be shown both the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and "Gordon's Calvary" near the Garden Tomb.

The location of the site "Gordon's Calvary" would have made executions carried out there a highly visible sight, for people using the main road leading north from the city. In addition to that, the presence of the skull-feature on the rock would have added to the deterrent effect.

The Hebrew word 'Golgotha' means "skull". "Calvary" is the Latin version of that. So you can call our church name "Skull Church." Wow, it sounds like a church for a bunch of bikers or weekend Hell's Angels wannabes.

Remember, by now, Jerusalem was packed with the pilgrims who came to the Passover. Everyone who has coming through the north gate would see the sight of the crucifixion. Rome had its way to communicate its messages to the people in that land: "You mess with Rome, this is what will happen to you."

E. FULFILLING EVERY LITTLE DETAIL OF THE PROPHECIES

John 19:23-24 Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. 24 They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be," that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: "They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots." Therefore the soldiers did these things.

At most Roman executions, a centurion would be assigned with four soldiers to carry on their execution details. But in Jesus' case, since He was so well known, I wouldn't doubt that there were more guards assigned. It was the privilege of the soldiers to take whatever personal belongings the dying criminals once had. The four soldiers each took a piece of clothing, and then they gambled for the seamless robe. This fulfilled Psalm 22:18 which we read at the beginning of our study.

Jesus let go of absolutely everything – even His clothes – becoming completely poor for us, so we could become completely rich in Him.

The apostle John does not record it, but the other Gospel writers tell us that some of the people passing by reviled Jesus, no doubt at the instigation of the chief priests and scribes. When you read Psalm 22, you see how David used the image of animals to describe the people who persecuted our Lord.

Listen, when people reject their Lord, they become like animals spiritually. Actually, I just insulted animals by saying that. Animals know who God is. When people reject their Lord, regardless of their intelligence, education, and social status, they become worse than animals.

F. THE CRUCIFIXION AT THE THE THIRD HOUR

Mark 15:23 Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. 24 And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take.

The wine mingled with myrrh was a drug to help deaden the awful ordeal of the cross for those about to die. The Roman soldiers didn't give this to help the dying man, rather they did only to extend his agony and suffering.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus was about 2 years old, the wise men brought Him myrrh. When He was dying on the cross, He was offered myrrh. Myrrh speaks of His death. But Jesus refused it here. He wanted to enter fully into His sufferings on our behalf and took no shortcuts. He refused the cup of sympathy so that He might better drink the cup of iniquity for us.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) Don't ever think that you are doing favors for God by being a Christian. We had nothing to offer to Him from the beginning other than our heart to follow Him. He is the One who gave everything for us.

2) Keep God's commandments; abide in His Word daily; don't let your carnal desires to get the upper hand in your daily life.