



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ

Guest(s): Dr. William Edwards (narrated by Jim Veldhuis)

Air Date: April 10, 2020

[Listen to the broadcast](#)

NOTE: This transcript may contain minor errors and/or discrepancies from the audio. This copy may be updated.

Roger Marsh: Crucifixion remains one of the most sadistic methods of execution ever imagined. Yet, despite its obvious cruelty, Christians view Jesus' crucifixion as the most glorious day in human history. On that day, the Messiah died on an old, rugged cross and paid for all of humanity sins. What a great reminder. I'm Roger Marsh and I'm joined for this addition of Family Talk by our host, Dr. James Dobson. Doctor, today is a hallowed day for all of us who believe in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Dobson: Today is Good Friday, and it's on this day that we're reminded of the sacrifice of our savior. It was around 2000 years ago that God the Father sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through Him it might be saved. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was crucified on this day to rescue us from death and give us life. Life eternal. The day Christ was crucified was the darkest day in the history of the world. Not only was it physically dark as the clouds rolled in, but the thunder crashed and it was also spiritually dark as the forces of evil thought they had won. There was a terrible earthquake at that time. So, here was Jesus, the only perfect human being to walk on the earth and the only begotten Son of God, hanging dead on a tree.

And yet even in that moment of darkness, hope was seen as the veil in the temple, the giant curtain that separated mankind from the presence of God, was torn. This symbolized that mankind could now enter into the presence of God because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But that glimmer of hope was only the beginning. Three days later, Christ rose from the dead. Hallelujah! And finally, the sting of death was removed and the curse of sin was broken and the enemy was defeated. Easter is what gives us purpose and meaning in our lives. It's what takes us to Christ, drives us toward him, to share the good news of the Gospel with everyone that we come in contact with.

Roger Marsh: It sure does, Doctor, but while Easter is the wonderful conclusion to this story, today is Good Friday and we wanted to focus on one somber aspect of this day, and that would be the crucifixion. To do that, we're going to listen to an article

written about the horrific torture that Jesus endured and Doctor, I know this is very difficult to listen to, at times.

Dr. Dobson: Crucifixion was one, if not the most inhumane execution styles ever used as a nation. Jesus' death was horrible, but that is also because he was carrying not just the weight of the cross, but the weight of our sins. All of the sins of the world were put on his back. In many ways, it's fitting that Jesus would die in a way that represents all of the evil cast upon him. I read an article written by a physician, Dr. William D. Edwards and associates, and it was first published in the Journal of the American Medical Association volume 255, number 11. Now we have asked a narrator to come in and read this article. Listen carefully as you will understand in a new way what Christ actually experienced.

Roger Marsh: Well, as we get started, the content of today's broadcast is intended for mature audiences. Listener discretion is advised. Here now as our friend Jim Veldhuis reading "On the Physical Death of Jesus" on today's edition of Family Talk

Jim Veldhuis: "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ." The life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth have formed the basis for the major world religion of Christianity, have appreciably influenced the course of human history and by virtue of a compassionate attitude towards the sick, also have contributed to the development of modern medicine. The eminence of Jesus as a historical figure and the suffering and controversy associated with his death have stimulated us to investigate in an interdisciplinary manner the circumstances surrounding his crucifixion. Accordingly, it is our intent to present not a theological treatise, but rather a medically and historically accurate account of the physical death of the one called Jesus Christ. The source material concerning Christ's death comprises a body of literature and not a physical body or its skeletal remains. Accordingly, the credibility of any discussion of Jesus's death will be determined primarily by the credibility of one's sources.

For this review, the source material includes the writings of ancient Christian and non-Christian authors, the writings of modern authors and the Shroud of Turin. Using the legal historical method of scientific investigation, scholars have established the reliability and accuracy of the ancient manuscripts. The story begins at Gethsemane. After Jesus and his disciples had observed the Passover meal in an upper room in a home in Southwest Jerusalem, they traveled to the Mount of Olives, Northeast of the city. At nearby Gethsemane, Jesus, apparently knowing that the time of his death was near, suffered great mental anguish, and as described by the physician Luke, his sweat became like blood. Although this is a very rare phenomenon, bloody sweat may occur in highly emotional states. As a result of hemorrhage into the sweat glands, the skin becomes fragile and tender. In the cold night air, it may have also produced chills.

Soon after midnight, Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane by the temple officials and was taken first to Anas and then to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest for that year. Between 1:00 AM and daybreak, Jesus was tried before Caiaphas and the political Sanhedrin and was found guilty of blasphemy, a crime punishable by

death. The rigors of Jesus' ministry, that is, traveling by foot throughout Palestine, would have precluded any major physical illness or a weak general constitution. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus was in good physical condition before his walk to Gethsemane. However, during the 12 hours between 9:00 PM Thursday and 9:00 AM Friday, he had suffered great emotional stress, abandonment by his closest friends, and a physical beating. Also, in the setting of a traumatic and sleepless night, he had been forced to walk more than two and a half miles to and from the sites of the various trials.

These physical and emotional factors may have rendered Jesus particularly vulnerable to the scourging. Flogging was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution and only women and Roman senators or soldiers were exempt. 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. 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 shock. The extent of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross. At the Praetorium, Jesus was severely whipped and 1 Peter two verse 24 indicates that the scourging of Jesus was particularly harsh.

It is not known whether the number of lashes was limited to 39 in accordance with Jewish law. The Roman soldiers, amused that this weakened man had claimed to be a King, began to mock him by placing a robe on his shoulders, a crown of thorns on his head, and a wooden staff as a scepter in his right hand. Next, they spat on Jesus and struck him on the head with a wooden staff. Moreover, when the soldiers tore the robe from Jesus' back, they probably reopened the scourging wounds.

Before we look at Christ's crucifixion, let's consider the history of crucifixion. Crucifixion probably first began among the Persians. Alexander the Great introduced the practice to Egypt and Carthage and the Romans appeared to have learned it from the Carthaginians. In its earliest form in Persia, the victim was either tied to a tree or was tied to or impaled on an upright post, usually to keep the guilty victim's feet from touching holy ground. Only later was a true cross used. It was characterized by an upright post and a horizontal crossbar and it had several variations. Although archeological and historical evidence strongly indicates that the low Tau cross was preferred by the Romans in Palestine at the time of Christ's crucifixion, practices often varied in a given geographic region and in accordance with the imagination of the executioners, and the Latin cross and other forms also may have been used.

It was customary for the condemned man to carry his own cross from the flogging post to the site of crucifixion outside the city walls. He was usually naked, unless this was prohibited by local customs. Since the weight of the

entire cross was probably well over 300 pounds, only the crossbar was carried. The crossbar, weighing 75 to 125 pounds, was placed across the nape of the victim's neck and balanced along both shoulders.

Usually the outstretched arms then were tied to it. The procession to the site of crucifixion was led by a complete Roman military guard headed by a Centurion. One of the soldiers carried a sign on which the condemned man's name and crime were displayed. Later, the sign would be attached to the top of the cross. The Roman guard would not leave the victim until they were sure of his death. At the site of execution, by law, the victim was given a bitter drink of wine mixed with myrrh as a mild analgesic. The criminal was then thrown to the ground on his back, with his arms outstretched along the crossbar. The hands could be nailed or tied to the crossbar, but nailing apparently was preferred by the Romans. The archeological remains of a crucified body found in an ossuary near Jerusalem and dating from the time of Christ indicate that the nails were tapered iron spikes approximately five to seven inches long with a square shaft, three eighths of an inch across.

Furthermore, ossuary findings and the Shroud of Turin have documented that the nails commonly were driven through the wrists rather than the palms. After both arms were fixed to the crossbar, the crossbar and the victim together were lifted onto the upright post. On the low cross, four soldiers could accomplish this relatively easily. However, on the tall cross, the soldiers used either wooden forks or ladders. Next, the feet were fixed to the cross, either by nails or ropes. Ossuary findings and the Shroud of Turin suggest that nailing was the preferred Roman practice. Although the feet could be fixed to the sides of the upright posts or to a wooden foot rest, they usually were nailed directly to the front of the vertical post. To accomplish this, flexion of the knees may have been quite prominent and the bent legs may have been rotated laterally.

When the nailing was completed, the sign was attached to the cross by nails or cords just above the victim's head. The soldiers and the civilian crowd often taunted and jeered the condemned man and the soldiers customarily divided up his clothes among themselves. The length of survival generally ranged from three or four hours to three or four days and appears to have been inversely related to the severity of the scourging. However, even if the scourging had been relatively mild, the Roman soldiers could hasten death by breaking the legs below the knees. Not uncommonly, insects would light upon or burrow into the open wounds or the eyes, ears, and nose of the dying and helpless victim and birds of prey would tear at these sites. Moreover, it was customary to leave the corpse on the cross to be devoured by predatory animals. However, by Roman law, the family of the condemned could take the body for burial after obtaining permission from the Roman judge.

Since no one was intended to survive crucifixion, the body was not released to the family until the soldiers were sure that the victim was dead. By custom, one of the Roman guards would pierce the body with a sword or lance, a fatal wound probably taught to most Roman soldiers. With knowledge of both

anatomy and ancient crucifixion practices, one may reconstruct the probable medical aspects of this form of slow execution. Each wound apparently was intended to produce intense agony and the contributing causes of death were numerous. The scourging prior to crucifixion served to weaken the condemned man, and if blood loss was considerable, to produce hypotension and even hypovolemic shock. When the victim was thrown to the ground on his back in preparation for transfixing one of the hands, his scourging wounds most likely would become torn open again and contaminated with dirt. Furthermore, with each respiration, the painful scourging wounds would be scraped against the rough wood of the vertical post.

As a result, blood loss from the back probably would continue throughout the crucifixion ordeal. With arms outstretched but not taut, the wrists were nailed to the cross bar. It has been shown that the ligaments and bones of the wrist can support the weight of a body hanging from them, but the palms cannot. Accordingly, the iron spikes probably were driven between the ligaments or bones of the wrist, although a nail in either location in the wrist might pass between the bony elements and thereby produce no fractures, the likelihood of painful injury is great. Furthermore, the driven nail would crush or sever the rather large median nerve. The stimulated nerve would produce excruciating bolts of fiery pain in both arms. Although scourging may have resulted in considerable blood loss, crucifixion per se was a relatively bloodless procedure since no major arteries other than perhaps the deep plantar arch, pass through the favored anatomic sites of transfixion.

The major pathophysiologic effect of crucifixion, beyond the excruciating pain, was a marked interference with normal respiration, particularly the ability to exhale. The weight of the body pulling down on the outstretched arms and shoulders would tend to cause shallow breathing. It is likely that this form of hindered respiration would also be affected by the onset of muscle cramps throughout the body. Adequate exhalation required lifting the body by pushing up on the feet and by flexing the elbows and abducting the shoulders. However, this maneuver would place the entire weight of the body on the tarsals, which were held in place by an iron spike, which would produce searing pain. Furthermore, flexion of the elbows would cause rotation of the wrists about the iron nails and caused fiery pain along the damaged median nerves.

As a result, each respiratory effort would become agonizing and tiring and lead eventually to asphyxia. The actual cause of death by crucifixion was multifactorial and varied somewhat with each case, but the two most prominent causes probably were hypovolemic shock and exhaustion leading to asphyxia. Other possible contributing factors included dehydration, stress induced arrhythmias, and congestive heart failure. Crucifraction, known as breaking the legs below the knees, led to an asphyxic death within minutes. Death by crucifixion was, in every sense of the word, excruciating. Even the word excruciating comes from the Latin *excruciat*, or, "out of the cross."

Now, let's look at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. After the scourging and the mocking, at about 9:00 AM, the Roman soldiers put Jesus' clothes back on him and then led him and two thieves to be crucified. Jesus apparently was so weakened by the severe flogging that he could not carry the crossbar from the Praetorium to the site of crucifixion one third of a mile away. Simon of Cyrene was summoned to carry Christ's cross, and the procession then made its way to Golgotha, also known as Calvary, an established crucifixion site. Here Jesus' clothes, except for a linen loincloth, again were removed, thereby probably reopening the scourging wounds. He then was offered a drink of wine mixed with myrrh, but after tasting it, refused the drink. Finally, Jesus and the two thieves were crucified. Although scriptural references are made to nails in the hands, these are not at odds with the archeological evidence of wrist wounds, since the ancients customarily considered the wrist to be a part of the hand.

It is unclear whether Jesus was crucified on the low cross or the Latin cross. Archeological findings favor the low cross and early tradition favors the Latin cross. The fact that Jesus later was offered a drink of wine vinegar from a sponge placed on the stalk of a hyssop plant, which was approximately 20 inches long, strongly supports the belief that Jesus was crucified on the short cross. The soldiers and the civilian crowd taunted Jesus throughout the crucifixion ordeal and the soldiers cast lots for his clothing. Christ spoke seven times from the cross. Since speech occurs during exhalation, these short terse utterances must have been particularly difficult and painful. At about 3:00 PM that Friday, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, bowed his head, and died. The Roman soldiers and onlookers recognized his moment of death.

Since the Jews did not want the bodies to remain on the crosses after sunset, the beginning of the Sabbath, they asked Pontius Pilate to order crucifraction to hasten the deaths of the three crucified men. The soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves, but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Rather one of the soldiers pierced his side, probably with an infantry spear, and produced sudden flow of blood and water. Later that day, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb. Jesus' death after only three to six hours on the cross, surprised even Pontius Pilate. The fact that Jesus cried out in a loud voice and then bowed his head and died suggest the possibility of a catastrophic terminal event. One popular explanation has been that Jesus died of cardiac rupture.

However, another explanation may be more likely. Jesus' death may have been hastened simply by his state of exhaustion and by the severity of the scourging, with its resulted blood loss and pre-shock state. The fact that he could not carry his cross bar supports this interpretation. The actual cause of Jesus' death, like that of other crucified victims, may have been multifactorial and related primarily to hypovolemic shock, exhaustion induced asphyxia and perhaps acute heart failure. A fatal cardiac arrhythmia may have accounted for his apparent catastrophic death.

Thus, it remains unsettled whether Jesus died of cardiac rupture or of cardio respiratory failure. However, the important feature may not be how he died, but rather whether he died. Clearly the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear thrust between his right ribs probably perforated not only the right lung, but also the pericardium and heart, and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.

Dr. Dobson: Well, that was the voice of Jim Veldhuis and he was reading an article that was published back in 1986 within the journal of the American Medical Association, and even though it's not a new article, the information still has great meaning for us. What powerful words those were. To think that Jesus went through all the physical agonies of crucifixion, along with the emotional burden of carrying the sin of the entire world, every sin that's ever been committed was on his back and on his heart during those hours that he spent on the cross, and when he uttered those words, "It is finished." He meant that he had provided a remedy for sin for all those who would believe on him and reach out and take that plan of salvation. We can hardly comprehend what happened 2000 years ago.

Dr. Dobson: It really, it makes me want to cry out. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you Lord Jesus for dying for me."

Roger Marsh: It certainly does for me as well, Dr Dobson, what a powerful program we've been listening to on this special edition of Family Talk. For those of you who don't know Christ as your savior, you can make that decision right now. Nothing is stopping you. God is waiting and willing to forgive all of your sins. If you'd like that relationship with Jesus, simply repeat this prayer along with me. Jesus, I know that I'm a sinner and that because of my sin, I am separated from you. Please come into my heart, forgive me of my sins, be my savior and my Lord. I surrender my life to you. Thank you Lord, for forgiving me and adopting me into your family.

Roger Marsh: Now, if you just prayed that prayer, we would love to hear from you. Call us here at Family Talk by dialing (877) 732-6825. A team member is standing by and will continue praying with you, and they'll even talk with you about how you can live a Jesus-centered life. Again, that number is (877) 732-6825. Also, if you'd like to read this article from today's program, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org, and you can also request a CD copy of this presentation when you're there, as well. That's DrJamesdobson.org and then tap on to the broadcast page. Well, thanks so much for joining us today. Be sure to tune in again next time for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. Have a blessed and safe Easter weekend.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

