

INTRODUCTION

June is a great time for weddings—we have a bunch of them scheduled this month. I love the funny story about a young preacher who was performing his first wedding ceremony. Fresh out of seminary, he was more nervous than the groom. In the middle of the wedding he completely forgot what he was supposed to say next. In that instant of panic he remembered the advice of one of his seminary professors. The professor had said, "If you ever lose your train of thought and forget what to say—don't panic—just quote the first scripture that comes to your mind." Recalling that advice, the young pastor quoted the first verse that came to his mind. As he looked at the bride and groom he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That doesn't exactly fit a wedding ceremony, but it is a wonderful verse anyway. It's in the passage of scripture before us today. Jesus has been arrested and tried. Pilate tried to release Him, but the mob cried out for Him to be crucified. Let's begin reading in Luke 23:26:

As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will say to the mountains, 'fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

This is the first of three messages I'll bring about the cross of Jesus. In this message we will examine four various aspects of the crucifixion.

I. THE DAY JESUS DIED

Traditionally, people have believed Jesus died on a Friday—it's been called Good Friday, and that He was buried late Friday afternoon. By Sunday morning, 36 hours later, the tomb was empty. There are several difficulties with this scenario, and with a closer examination of scripture, it appears unlikely that Jesus was crucified on a Friday. Let's answer the question:

Did Jesus die on Good Friday or Good Wednesday?

Here are several facts to consider: **(1) The Bible never says Jesus was crucified on Friday—only on a day before the Sabbath.** Since Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath, an assumption was made that the crucifixion appeared on a Friday. The idea of Holy Week including Good Friday is part of the Roman Catholic Church calendar that has been around for many centuries—it includes the dates for Ash Wednesday and a Lenten season as well. The terms "Ash Wednesday" "Lenten" or "Good Friday" never appear in the Bible. Since Ash Wednesday begins Lent, Fat Tuesday and the Mardi Gras excess is all connected to this church calendar as well. We often follow tradition without stopping to consider what the Bible really says. You may be wondering, "If Jesus was crucified on a day before the Sabbath, what other option than Friday is there?"

(2) During Passover week there is a "high Sabbath" that occurs on the day of the month (14 Nisan—Leviticus 23:4-8) NOT necessarily on Saturday. Saturday was the regular Sabbath, but during Passover there was a special Sabbath. Some of our American holidays fall on the same day of the week every year—Labor Day and Thanksgiving are two examples. But many holidays like July 4 and Christmas occur on *dates* on the calendar so they can fall on any day of the week. Passover started on a day of the *month*—14 Nisan—not a day of the week. The first full day of Passover was to be a special Sabbath in which no work was to be done. So during Passover this special "Sabbath" could fall on *any* day of the week—not just Saturday. John states Jesus was crucified before this special Sabbath, not the day before the regular weekly Sabbath.

"Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down." (John 19:31)

But the main reason it is unlikely Jesus was crucified on Friday is because:

(3) Jesus spoke of being in the grave for three days and three nights. Jesus predicted that *after* three days, He would be resurrected. Jesus predicted: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40) Now, either Jesus told a lie, was mistaken, or He was correct in predicting He would be buried for three full days and three nights. The problem with Good Friday is that it doesn't allow for this scripture to be fulfilled.

(4) You cannot squeeze three days and three nights between a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection. Clearly by Easter Sunday morning, Jesus was already gone from the tomb. The Greek text literally says the women arrived at the tomb "after the Sabbaths." (Matthew 28:1) People who defend the Good Friday tradition claim He was in the tomb "parts" of three days. Figure it out for yourself. If He was crucified on Friday afternoon and gone by Sunday morning that's only 36 hours. Three days and three nights equal 72 hours. No matter how you try to explain it, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't get three days and three nights between a Friday crucifixion and a Sunday resurrection.

(5) The Jews counted days from sunset to sunset: It gets a little confusing to us because our days begin at midnight, but when the sun set, the Jews started a new day. For instance, today in Jerusalem when Friday night rolls around, it's already the Sabbath. But by sunset on Saturday night, the Sabbath is over and Sunday has already begun. So based on all these factors, it seems

likely Jesus was crucified on Wednesday. Here's what the time line would be: On Wednesday, Jesus was hung on the cross at 9 a.m. and died at about 3 p.m. The Jews took the bodies down before the sun set because Thursday (15 Nissan) was the special Passover Sabbath.

So Thursday was night one and day one in the tomb; Friday was night two and day two; Saturday (the weekly Sabbath) was night three and day three in the Tomb. When the women arrived before dawn on Sunday, Jesus was already gone.

What's the point? Am I going to start an anti-Good Friday society? No. But I believe in being true to the Word of God, especially when we have any tradition that is not based on the Word. It doesn't matter what day Jesus was crucified, but it's important to know *all* scripture is fulfilled to the letter, and Jesus did spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. During the week proceeding Easter every year, I don't really celebrate Good Friday, instead on Wednesday of that week, I always pause and thank God Jesus suffered and died for me.

II. THE TORTURE BEFORE THE CROSS

It's important to remember before Jesus was ever nailed to the cross He endured a great deal of agony and pain. Most of us have seen a movie, or attended a re-enactment of the Life of Christ and seen a staged crucifixion. But we really can't imagine the depth of cruelty and sadism involved in crucifixion. Crucifixion was originated by the Carthaginian about 400 B.C. because other means of execution were too quick. Beheading was a relatively merciful form of killing—death came quickly. But crucifixion was designed to prolong the pain and suffering. Sometimes the torture leading up the cross killed the prisoner before he could even be nailed to the cross. Let's notice what happened to Jesus on that Good Wednesday:

1. He was beaten

Sometimes people say Jesus received 39 lashes, but the Bible never says that. Jewish law prohibited a man from being beaten more than forty times, and the Jews were so afraid they might have miscounted and broken God's law that they always stopped at 39 to be safe. However, Jesus was not beaten by Jews, but by the Roman Soldiers—and they had no limit.

A few years ago, a group of Christian physicians published an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) about the physical aspects of the death of Jesus. This is what the article said about the beating Jesus received:

"Flogging was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution. The usual instrument was short whip with several single or braided leather thongs in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals. For scourging, the prisoner was stripped of his clothing, and his hands were tied to an upright post. The back, buttocks, and legs were flogged either by two soldiers or by one who alternated positions. The severity of the scourging was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death. As the soldiers repeatedly struck the victim's back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs 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." (Edwards et. al. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 255, No. 11)

As a boy, when I read in the Bible that Pilate had Jesus "scourged" I didn't understand that word. I remember asking my Pastor, Brother Fred, what that word meant. He could have replied it meant to "be beaten" and he would have been technically correct. Instead he gave me an answer I'll never forget. He said, "David, that was when a cruel Roman soldier turned the bare back of Jesus into hamburger meat."

Don't forget—at any moment during His torture He could have escaped. He could have said, "God these people aren't worth this kind of pain and suffering. He told Peter He could have called 12 legions of angels to rescue Him. But He didn't—because He loves us.

2. He was mocked

In addition to the physical pain of the crucifixion, there was also the public shame involved. Jesus was the object of the disgust and ridicule of the both the Roman soldiers and the Jewish leaders. After His beating, Jesus stood naked before the Roman soldiers. At this point, they turned Him into a comic king. They pressed a crown made of 3-inch thorns on His head. They decided if He was a king, He needed a scepter, so they used a stick. Then they blindfolded Jesus and spun him around, slamming the club into His face and head, asking Him to identify the one who was hitting Him. They laughed at Him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spit upon his face and plucked out His beard. In all of this, Jesus never responded in anger or hatred. The Jews ridiculed Him saying if He was really a king He should show His power by saving Himself.

We often say, "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." But we know sometimes words can hurt more deeply than sticks and stones. Imagine the pain Jesus felt because of the hatred and ridicule of the people He had come to save.

3. He carried the cross

Prisoners were forced to carry their cross in a procession through the streets. This was part of their humiliation. They would be surrounded by four Roman soldiers and would wear a sign around their neck announcing their crime. Jesus tried to carry His cross, but He was so weakened from the torture He fell under the weight. Simon, a man from the country of Cyrene, was enlisted to carry the cross for Jesus. It's no surprise Jesus was unable to carry the cross. Dr. Edwards and the other physicians who studied the crucifixion wrote:

"The severe scourging, with its intense pain and blood loss, most probably left Jesus in a pre-shock state. The physical and mental abused meted out by the Jews and the Romans, as well as the lack of food, water, and sleep, also contributed to his generally weakened state. Therefore even before the crucifixion, Jesus' physical condition was at least serious and possibly critical." (Edwards et. al. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 255, No. 11)

III. THE PLACE OF HIS DEATH

Jesus was taken outside the city of Jerusalem to a hill called Golgotha, the place of the skull. We would call it "Skull Hill." There's a hill outside of Jerusalem today many believe to be the site of Golgotha. You can see in this picture the face of this hill resembles the face of a skull. You can see two eye sockets and a nose socket. It probably looked more like a skull 2,000 years ago. This skull hill is located near a Garden Tomb where many people believe Jesus was buried.

Throughout the centuries the Arab Muslims intentionally turned Jewish and Christian holy sites into cemeteries. They assumed burying their dead would desecrate these places. It's interesting the Muslims converted this hill into a cemetery several centuries before archeologists suggested it was the site of the crucifixion. That supports the theory this was the place of the skull.

You may wonder where we get the word "Calvary" since it doesn't appear in the Bible. There are three words used in different translations to describe this place. Golgotha is the Aramaic word for skull. The Greek word is kranion, from which we get our word "cranium." The Latin word for skull is "calvaria." That's why we talk about Calvary.

I have visited this site over a dozen times, and every time I see it I am overwhelmed with a mixture of sorrow and joy. Today it's just a stark hill rising next to a crowded Arab bus station. But whenever I think about what Jesus did there, I am amazed at the depth of His love for me. As the song says, "Amazing Love, how can it be that You my King would die for me?"

I can recall when I sang my very first solo. I was only about 10 years old and I was attending R.A. camp. The song I chose went like this: "Years I spent in vanity and pride; caring not my Lord was crucified; knowing not it was for me He died; at Calvary. Mercy there was great; and grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me. There my burdened soul found liberty; at Calvary."

If you get a chance to visit this site, I recommend it, but if you don't that's okay, too. I recall reading about when the great pastor Dr. R.G. Lee visited Jerusalem for the first time. When they entered the area leading up to this hill Dr. Lee left the group and ran ahead. When the group arrived, Dr. Lee was on His knees weeping. The guide said, "Dr. Lee have you ever been here before?" Dr. Lee replied, "Yes, I was here 2,000 years ago. I was here in the heart and mind of Jesus when He died for me." You've been there. You were there in the mind and heart of Jesus the day He arrived at Skull Hill.

IV. THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

When Jesus was nailed to the cross they took huge spikes and drove them through His hands and feet. The article in JAMA estimates the nails were nine inches long and resembled railroad spikes, but were much sharper. After the nails were pounded into his flesh, they lifted the cross up and dropped it into a hole. As the cross hit the bottom of the hole, the body of Jesus would have sagged against the nails, further tearing His flesh.

Pilate had a sign placed above His head saying, "Jesus of Nazareth The King of the Jews." Matthew tells us the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. In paintings of Jesus you'll often see a sign above Him that says, "INRI." Through the years I've had people ask me what the word "INRI" means. Those are the first letters in the four Latin words that say: IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He offered seven statements. The first of these seven statements is in our text. After the initial spasm of pain passed, Jesus offered a prayer of forgiveness. He said, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." The word "said" is in the perfect tense in Greek which means Jesus "kept on saying." When they drove in the nails, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." As they mocked Him and ridiculed Him, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

There are two things about forgiveness worth noting: First, forgiveness is the greatest need you have in your life. It's not more money, more friends, or better health you need—it is God's forgiveness. A thousand years from now money, friends, and health will be useless, but God's forgiveness will be the most valuable treasure you'll still have. The Bible teaches we are all sinners—we have all made mistakes. None of us are exempt.

I read once that early in his ministry Billy Graham was going into a certain city for an evangelistic crusade. He wrote to the mayor of the city, who was on the steering committee, asking him to send him the names of some of the residents of the city who had spiritual problems and were in need of forgiveness. Dr. Graham planned to pray for these individuals and then to contact them during the crusade. He was surprised when the mayor sent him the telephone directory for the entire city. But that's true, because we ALL need God's forgiveness!

Second, the only place in the Universe to receive forgiveness is from Jesus. Once Jesus was confronted with a paralyzed man and He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." The Jewish leaders were indignant. They challenged Jesus by thinking, "That's blasphemy! Who can forgive sins except God?" But Jesus read their thoughts and replied, "So that you will know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins, friend, take up your bed and walk." There were two miracles there that day. The miracle of forgiveness and the miracle of healing. Jesus indicated forgiveness is the greater of the two.

The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death, but the GIFT of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Jesus prayed a prayer: "Father forgive them." He included us in that prayer, too. Did God answer that prayer? It's really up to you. Jesus offers you forgiveness today—salvation is a free gift, but you won't benefit from it until you accept it. We passed out free American flags a few weeks ago, but you don't have one unless you went by and received one—forgiveness is the same way. God offers it, but you must receive it by faith.

Forgiveness is free to you, but it was paid for at an exorbitant price. He took our sins in His body, so we could be forgiven. He took our dirt and filth of sin upon Himself so we could stand clean before God.

CONCLUSION

I've told you before about a church in Norway called "The Church of the Lamb." On the steeple of this old church is a statue of a lamb. When the church was being built, a workman was finishing the steeple when he lost his balance and fell. He certainly would have been killed when he hit the stone pavement below, but at the moment he fell, a shepherd was leading his flock of sheep through the narrow streets. The workman fell on one of the lambs and it broke his fall just enough that he survived. But the lamb was crushed to death. He understood the parallel truth between that Lamb and Jesus Christ, so he had the statue of the Lamb placed on the steeple.

The Bible says Jesus is the Lamb of God, and when He was on the cross, God laid upon Him the iniquities of us all—and when we fell on Him, He was crushed to death—but we can live.

OUTLINE

I. THE DAY JESUS DIED

Did Jesus die on Good Friday or Good Wednesday?

II. THE TORTURE BEFORE THE CROSS

1. He was beaten
2. He was mocked
3. He carried the cross

III. THE PLACE OF HIS DEATH

1. Golgotha (skull)
2. Kranion (cranium)
3. Calvaria (skull)

IV. THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes