

March 27, 2022 The Sentence Matthew 27:15-31

In his little book, *The Case For Easter*, which is really a small portion of his larger book, *The Case For Christ*, Lee Strobel said there are 4 questions to which he sought to find answer. (1) Did Jesus die on the cross? (2) Was HE placed in the tomb (buried)? (3) Was the tomb really empty? (4) Was Jesus seen by verifiable witnesses following those other 3 events? It does not take a rocket scientist, or even a devout believer to recognize, that Strobel was questioning the basic statements of the historical Christian creeds. He started off in the position, "It just can't be true!" Lee Strobel was not a believer at the beginning of his quest.

The Koran was written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It makes the claim that Jesus did not die on the cross, that he survived crucifixion, and fled to India. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a number of scholars tried to explain away the resurrection by stating Jesus swooned, or fainted on the cross from exhaustion and was later resuscitated by the cool air inside the tomb carved out of stone. In 1929 D. H. Lawrence wove this theme into one of his short stories. In 1965 Hugh Schonfield wrote a novel, *The Passover Plot*, in which only the inadvertent stabbing of Jesus by the Roman soldier foiled HIS attempt to escape the cross alive. Schonfield stated and I quote, "We are nowhere claiming...the (book) represents what actually happened. A string of novels appeared that likewise take up the idea that Jesus survived the cross. 1972, the Jesus scroll by Donovan Joyce; 1082 Holy

Blood, Holy Grail. These are works of fiction, which have succeeded to some extent in leaving the impression that there are reasons to believe Jesus could have survived in the minds of those who cherish disbelief. Works of fiction, with not basis in historical facts.

It is not unreasonable to ask the question, did Jesus die on the cross. There are facts that lead us to be able to say, “yes HE did.” And I am going to share some of those facts with you. First of all is the simple unvarnished truth, that no one according to the records of ancient Rome survived crucifixion. It was a means of inflicting painful, agonizing capital punishment. And every detail of Roman soldiers involved in crucifixion understood another basic fact: if the prisoner managed to escape, all of the Roman soldiers involved in the event would themselves be crucified.

Secondly, you need to know the cross was an asphyxiation machine. And it was efficient. What the cross achieved was this: the victim fastened to it had his chest placed in the position of having inhaled. To breathe, he had to lift himself by means of his fastened feet to exhale, to draw in another tortured breath. The process was torturous. One is tempted to say barbaric. But it was effective on two fronts. It killed its victims, and it convinced many that they did not want to do anything that would lead to their being on a Roman cross.

How painful was it? No word existed in the languages of the time to describe the agony induced by

crucifixion. Now you know what happens in that sort of situation. Someone invents a new word. And the Romans did. Excruciating. Ex means, out of, Cruc means cross. And the rest of the word means in the process. The pain that results from the cross. And yes, the word came into being when Latin was the language of Empire.

The question is did Jesus die? To get the whole picture you have to read Matthew 27 carefully. Verse 20: the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas, and to have Jesus executed.” And the cry becomes in verse 22, “Let him be crucified.” And to prevent a riot on the matter Pilate does the political thing. Verse 26: “he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.”

It sounds so simple. But not so. If you are a fan of old movies, and I am, I have seen Errol Flynn flogged for disobedience...not even any blood. I have seen slaves whipped...a little blood but no life threatening damage. The Roman experience was not pristine, it was brutal. 39 lashes with an instrument that peeled skin and ripped flesh. There are records of such a sentence itself resulting in death.

Lee Strobel interviewed a doctor by the name of Alexander Metherell, because he had been given to understand that he had done a Ph. D. in engineering, which is why he speaks with such confidence about these matters. Dr. Metherell says it began following the Last Supper. Jesus goes to

the Mount of Olives and is praying. In Luke 24:40 Jesus is described as being in great anguish “and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” Strobel pounced and asked, “Isn’t that just the product of an overactive imagination?” Remember that Luke was a doctor. I am not suggesting for a moment that he understood what a modern physician would understand, but the detail was important enough that Luke recorded it. Here is what Dr. Metherell said in answer. “No not at all. It is not very common, but it is associated with a high degree of psychological stress. The condition is called hemotidrosis. Anxiety causes the release of chemicals that cause the break down of capillaries in the sweat glands.” Jesus bleeds. “What this does is it makes his skin very fragile.”

You have heard me say before that Jesus lost half of his blood by volume as the result of the flogging. Dr. Metherell is the source for that piece of information. He also tells us this, that blood loss causes hypovolemic shock. The heart races to circulate blood that is no longer available. Second the blood pressure drops causing collapse. Third the kidneys shut down. And fourth, the victim becomes very thirsty. All of those details are part of the crucifixion story. Jesus falls under the burden of the cross beam for his execution. He cries out that he is thirsty as he struggles to breathe on the cross. And Metherell even concludes, that the reason Jesus cries out “It is finished!” is that he can feel his heart hammering away. His heart goes into arrest. And so Jesus dies.

But there is more medical information. Hypovolemic shock, cause two other things to occur. Clear fluid builds up in the pericardium, the sac that surrounds the heart. And clear fluid also builds up around the lungs. When John describes the soldier piercing Jesus side with a spear that has an 28 inch blade, out comes blood and water. Dr. Metherell makes a simple scientific statement. John's description in chapter 19 of his gospel is consistent with what modern medicine would expect to have happened." Whether the Roman guard knew it or not, he applied the acid test to the condition of Jesus. Dr. Metherell told Lee Strobel, "There was absolutely no question, that Jesus was dead."

I am told that these are grizzly details. And I would not argue with that viewpoint. But I would also say it is wise for the faithful to know that modern medical science can look back, read the gospel accounts and say with utter confidence. The result of the sentence of crucifixion was death....every time. The proof of that is in what John saw and recorded. The cross did what it was supposed to do. The soldiers knew a dead man when they saw one. "Jesus was dead."

Let us pray;

Lord we believe, help us when we doubt. Thank you for modern rational explanations that make it plain we can trust your word and the message it brings us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen