



John 19:31-37

Death of Christ: Factor or Fiction?

There was a shout of victory from the cross just before Christ gave up his spirit. ”

It was not the moan of a defeated martyr, nor the sigh of a patient resignation. Jesus triumphantly accomplished the work he was sent by his Father to fulfill, and when he completed it shouted one word, Finished! You can also translate it Done! or Complete! Then he bowed his head and he gave up his spirit. Jesus work of redemption was finished. There was nothing else to be added by anyone, anywhere, now or in the future.

Jesus in that moment summoned death to serve him. John does not say, He died, But that he gave up his spirit. John is emphasizing the voluntary nature of the act. Augustine said it correctly; He gave up His life because He willed it, when He willed it, and as He willed it. You and I cannot say that about our own deaths.

In John 19:31-37 we have the perspective of an eyewitness to the death of Jesus. The apostle John carefully observed something unusual at the crucifixion. These are facts that made such a deep impression on him as he watched the crucifixion take place. The legs of Jesus were not broken as was the case of the other two men crucified that day, and in his case a Roman soldier seeing that he was already dead, thrust a spear into his side and out flowed water and blood. They did not pierce the sides of the other two crucified men. Why did all of this take place in this manner?

JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED ON THE DAY OF PREPARATION

It was the day of preparation for the Passover (v. 31), so the Jewish leaders took steps to have all three bodies of the dead removed from the crosses before sundown when the Passover observation would begin. On the afternoon of the crucifixion of Jesus, the people of Israel were busy with their preparations in advance before the Sabbath began in the evening at 6 p.m. when no buying, slaying of the lambs, cooking the food, cleaning or other preparations could take place. At sundown when the first star appeared on the horizon, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover meal would begin.

It therefore was of absolute urgency that the Jewish authorities get the bodies buried before the Sabbath would begin as the sun went down. Then, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not stay on the crosses on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was an especially important one), the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to have the victims legs broken and the bodies taken down (John 19:31 NET).

The Old Testament Scriptures made it clear that the land would be defiled if a body was hanging all night on a tree (Deut. 21:22-23; Joshua 8:29). The apostle Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 in Galatians 3:13 when he

a tree (Deut. 21:22-23; Joshua 8:29). The apostle Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 in Galatians 3:13 when he wrote, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Such defilement would be even worse on the Sabbath, God forbid on the Passover!"

The crucifixion was an exceedingly painful, and an unusually cruel and slow death. No vital organ of the body was directly affected. Even after death the Roman custom was to leave the bodies of crucified criminals on their crosses to rot in the sun until the birds of prey and wild animals consumed them as a public example to the community at large. The Jewish leaders had to get permission from Pilate before removing the bodies.

Pilate was surprised that he was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him if he had been dead for some time (Mark 15:44 NET).

The Roman governor gave permission for the legs to be broken to hasten the death of the victims. To accomplish this the soldier placed a crushing blow to the leg with a heavy iron sledgehammer or mall. This horrible jolt to the body would hasten death, which would otherwise be delayed by several hours or even days.

Archaeologists have found skeletal remains of crucifixion victims that revealed a single blow had shattered the lower legs. The smashing of the lower leg bones was called in Latin the *crurifragium*. It caused the victim to die rather quickly because of the inability of the person to breathe properly. When the legs were broken, the chest cavity would then bear the total pressure of the body's weight. He would hang there in the form of a "V" with full weight on his arms. Therefore, the only way a crucified man could obtain a full lung of air was to raise himself by means of pushing his legs to ease the tension on his arms and chest muscles. Once his legs were broken, he could not possibly raise himself to get air and there would be a greater constriction of the chest, and he would suffocate in a matter of minutes. This death, though painful, was more merciful than the enduring crucifixion.

THE FIRST PROOF THAT JESUS WAS DEAD

These Roman soldiers were trained executioners who would make no mistake about a criminal's death. Pilate ordered the legs broken, and they would not dare disobey him unless absolutely sure that Christ was already dead. These hardened Roman soldiers were the first witnesses to Christ's death.

Jesus had already died so his legs were not broken.

Clearly the eyewitness states that Jesus was dead because when the soldiers came to break his legs to hasten his death, they saw that he was already dead and there was no need to break them (v. 33 NET). John saw them, "But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Jesus was already dead is in the perfect tense in the original, having died and was now dead."

God's perfect Passover Lamb

As the sun went down over Jerusalem, the day Christ died, John recalled that God's perfect Lamb fulfilled all of the important Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus as the true Passover lamb, that God provided, did not have any of His bones broken (Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20). You must not break a bone of it (24:47b NET).

The slaying of the Passover lambs was taking place in the Temple at this very moment when the Lamb of God was dying on the tree. The Pascal supper would take place in a few hours in Jewish homes across the land just as it had for centuries.

The timing of the death of Jesus at the very hour when the Passover lambs were being slain stuck in the mind of this eyewitness. The apostle John saw clearly these things were being done because it was the day of the preparation of the Passover celebrating the time when God delivered the people from their slavery in Egypt. Centuries earlier in Egypt the blood of the lamb was spread on the doorposts and lintel of the house over every Jewish home. That night when the angel of death visited every home in Egypt wherever he saw the blood he would pass over and spare the first-born. I will pass through the land of Egypt in the same night, and I will attack all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both of humans and of animals, and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, so that when I see the blood I will pass over you, and this plague will not fall on you to destroy you when I attack the land of Egypt (Exodus 12:12-13 NET). Also, in 12:23 we read, For the Lord will pass through to strike Egypt, and when he sees the blood on the top of the doorframe and the two side posts, then the Lord will pass over the door, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you (NET).

The astounding thing that John pondered was the fact that not a bone of Jesus was broken proving that he was the Passover Lamb that God provided that afternoon. Not one bone of the Passover lamb was broken. God slew his own lamb and made provision in the blood of Jesus so that when the judgment of God comes on us, he will see the blood of His Son and pass over us. Jesus, as God's perfect lamb died in our place. His blood covers all our sins. The angel of judgment will pass over all who trust in God's Lamb to atone for their sins.

THE SECOND PROOF THAT JESUS WAS DEAD

To make doubly sure that Jesus was dead, or out of one last act of hate, a Roman soldier picked up a spear and thrust it deeply into the side of Jesus (vv. 32-34). Beyond a doubt Jesus was dead. There was no point in breaking his legs. The only reason the legs of Jesus were not broken was that He was already dead. A real man with a real human body, with real human blood, died on the cross that afternoon outside the walls of Jerusalem.

The apostle John tells us he watched the horrible scene as, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water flowed out immediately (John 19:34 NET).

No simple pricking is in the mind of the eyewitness. He sees the infliction of a wound intended to kill someone. No doubt, the soldier wanted to make doubly sure that Jesus was dead and certify to the centurion and Pilate that he was dead. The soldier probably thought, If this Jew is not already dead, this will finish you off. ”

The wound made in Jesus' side was a large one and John witnessed blood and water flowing out of it. His purpose for stating what he saw was to certify the real physical death of Jesus. John was testifying as an eyewitness that Jesus had a real body and died a real human death. One of the reasons he was writing his

eyewitness that Jesus had a real body and died a real human death. One of the reasons he was writing his gospel was to refute any Gnostic nonsense. It was the testimony of an eyewitness, testifying in simple language the simple facts the death of his friend. He wrote: *And the person who saw it has testified (and his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth), so that you also may believe* (John 19:35 NET).

The gash from the blade of the spear would be large enough to permit the open hand to be thrust into it. The important thing on the heart of John, years later as he wrote down his testimony, was that he could certify as an eyewitness that Jesus died. He saw the bloody evidence before his own eyes. It was still vivid to him.

Moreover, it had the hand of God all over it, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. ”

God intervened and the Scriptures were fulfilled

The author tells us that this act was the fulfillment of Jewish Scriptures. For these things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled, Not a bone of his will be broken (John 19:36).

Prophecy was fulfilled that afternoon in a most unusual manner. One Scripture said the Savior's bones must not be broken, and another said his body must be pierced. The Roman soldiers would have done exactly the opposite that afternoon. They came to break the legs of Jesus as they had the other men. Moreover, they had no intention of piercing the side of Jesus with the spear. To John's utter amazement that is exactly what the soldiers did that afternoon.

Why was this so important in the mind of John?

The sovereign hand of God is written all over these events at Calvary. God intervened and caused it to happen just as his Word had said it would centuries before. God overruled the circumstances and caused it to happen according to his will. The enemy was unconsciously executing God's perfect will. A sovereign God was in control at Calvary. The soldiers had received instructions to break the legs of Jesus, but this had not been done because he was already dead. The soldiers had not received an order to pierce the Savior's side, but this is what the soldier did.

C. H. Spurgeon observed, That our Lord's bones should remain unbroken, and yet that he should be pierced, seemed a very unlikely thing; but it was carried out. The purpose of God had to be fulfilled. In case of the typical Passover lamb, not one of its bones was broken. Moreover, with the divine protection of a righteous man guaranteed that God protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken (Ps. 34:20). Jesus was the only perfectly righteous man. He was without sin. He never experienced personal sin.

A fountain was opened at Calvary

Moreover, another prophecy was fulfilled that day. I will pour out on the kingship of David and the population of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication so that they will look to me, the one they have pierced. They will lament for him as one laments for an only son, and there will be a bitter cry for him like the bitter cry for a firstborn (Zechariah 12:10 NET). A little later the prophet wrote: If that day there will be a fountain opened up for the dynasty of David and the people of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and impurity (13:1 NET).

The blood of Jesus is the only cure for our sin problem. The blood of Jesus Christ purges us of every sin when we trust him as our Savior. Jesus died in our place. His blood cleanses us of all sin and the judgment of God is turned away and will pass over all who trust in him.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement (Leviticus 17:11). The Jewish Talmud said, There is no atonement except with blood (Yoma 5a). Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22b NET).

The apostle John wrote: But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:9 NET).

THE THIRD PROOF THAT JESUS WAS DEAD

Pilate was surprised that he was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him if he had been dead for some time. When Pilate was informed by the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph (Mark 15:44-45 NET).

Pilate certified from the centurion that Jesus was dead. Pilate had clear evidence that there was no life in Jesus' body.

Then friends took Him down from the cross and gave Him a proper Jewish burial. Those who handled his body knew that he was dead. Otherwise, they would not have buried him that afternoon.

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus (but secretly, because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he went and took the body away. Nicodemus, the man who had previously come to Jesus at night, accompanied Joseph, carrying a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about seventy-five pounds. Then they took Jesus' body and wrapped it, with the aromatic spices, in strips of linen cloth according to Jewish burial customs. Now at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb where no one had yet been buried. And so, because it was the Jewish day of preparation and the tomb was nearby, they placed Jesus' body there (John 19:38-42 NET).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped that incorruptible body in spices, for it is to be fragrant for evermore to all His people as the death like which there is no other observed F. W. Grant.

The overwhelming evidence is Jesus died in Jerusalem and was buried and after the third day rose from the dead.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The whole Gospel of John is centered on the death of Jesus Christ. Without the certainty of his death, there can be no resurrection. He is either dead or he is alive.

We cannot escape the evidence that Jesus Christ died on the cross and was buried the same day in Jerusalem.

The eyewitness testimony is clear. The death of Christ was no figment of the imagination. The explicit details are not a fraud inflicted on humanity. Jesus Christ died on the cross and was buried in a Jewish tomb according to the custom of the Jewish people.

Jesus Christ is the Passover Lamb God provided for his people.

Not a bone of the Passover lamb must be broken in the preparation of the meal. Jesus Christ is the perfect fulfillment of the greater Lamb of God who takes away the sins of all who will believe on Him.

It is only the precious blood of Jesus that will cleanse you and me of all our sins and guilt.

There is a fountain filled with blood

Drawn from Immanuel's veins;

And sinners plunged beneath that flood

Lose all their guilty stains.

The Roman soldiers, swift to get the crucifixion over with, were unwittingly agents for fulfilling Christ's promise to the penitent thief, "Today you shall be with Me in paradise."

The dying thief rejoiced to see

That fountain in his day

And there may I, as vile as he,

Wash all my sins away.

John saw the blood and the water come out of the side of Jesus (v. 34). William Cowper applied it to his own sinful heart and wrote:

Ever since by faith I saw the stream

Thy flowing wounds supply,

Redeeming love has been my theme

And shall be till I die.

Our sin debt was paid in full when Jesus shouted, "It is finished!"

Finished! (John 19:31) The debt is paid in full! Jesus paid in full the righteous demands of a holy law. He paid our debt in full. Only the blood of the Lamb of God can take away the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29, 35-36; Heb. 9:24-28; Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32; Matt. 20:17-19; Jn. 10:11-18). Jesus voluntarily made an end to our sin and our guilt. He accomplished what the Father had sent Him to do. Our atonement was completed with that victorious shout.

And this is still the hope of every guilty sinner today. The same Lamb of God and his shed blood shall never lose its power to cleanse and save. We are saved by the death of Christ alone. Have you by faith spread the blood of Jesus over the doorpost of your heart?

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood

Shall never lose its power,

Till all the ransomed church of God

Be saved to sin no more.

The One who was slain as the Lamb of God will one day return as our Judge.

Revelation 1:7 reads, 'Look! He is returning with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes on the earth will mourn because of him. This will certainly come to pass! Amen (NET).

Jesus Christ will return to judge the deeds of every person who has ever lived. One day we will each one stand before him. People in the future will look on the pierced One. The prophet Zechariah tells us it was Yahweh who is pierced, and the piercing is mortal. Those who pierced him shall mourn as one mourns for an only son, his firstborn.

Some of those present at the crucifixion were convicted of their horrible sin (Luke 23:48). Those who had been crying, 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!' were overcome with the proofs of the superhuman exaltation of Jesus. They left the scene continuing to beat their breasts and lamenting over the crucified one after they had permitted him to be crucified.

Can you imagine spending eternity lamenting the decision you made to reject Jesus Christ as your sacrifice for sin? Everyone who rejects Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away their sins will continue to beat their breasts because they rejected him.

How will you spend eternity? Will it be in worship to the Lamb who sits on the throne? Or will you spend eternity in hell? Those are the only two choices available. Neutral you cannot be with Christ.

One day the whole universe will stand before him in judgment. It will then be too late to decide what you will do with the death of Jesus. Have you put your faith in the blood that flowed from that wounded side?

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Index to this Series on the Life of Christ

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