

How Did Jesus Endure the Agony of the Cross?

When *The Passion of the Christ* was released 21 years ago, Hollywood critics mocked it because it offered a realistic depiction of Jesus' torture and death. I know people who couldn't watch the movie because it offered such an accurate portrayal of a brutal Roman execution.

Actor Jim Caviezel, who played Jesus in that film, was only pretending to feel pain when he was flogged and nailed to a cross. But the unimaginable agony Jesus endured at Calvary was real.

Nobody performed an autopsy on Jesus' mangled body after He was taken down from the cross. But doctors who have studied the Bible's description of His death say the pain would have been beyond excruciating. In fact, the word "excruciating" means "out of the cross."

After His arrest, Jesus was flogged so mercilessly that His skin was stripped off His back, exposing muscle and bone. After being slapped, punched, crowned with thorns and beaten with reeds, He was covered with a red robe and led to Golgotha. There, soldiers drove nails (more like seven-inch spikes) into His wrists—most likely hitting the median nerve, causing more blinding pain. They nailed another long metal spike into His feet.

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At that point, Jesus would have suffered dislocation of His shoulders, cramps and spasms, dehydration from severe blood loss, fluid in His lungs and eventual lung collapse and heart failure. Yet, according to Matthew 27:34, Jesus refused to take a pain-killing solution. He endured the pain for us.

How did Jesus handle this pain? Many scholars say He recited Psalm 22 throughout His ordeal. These words, which are quoted more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament passage, describe in detail the death of the Messiah. In the Gospels, we read that Jesus quoted this psalm while He hung on the cross.

He had most likely memorized Psalm 22 since He was a boy in the synagogue in Nazareth. I encourage you to meditate on this psalm this week as we remember the crucifixion.

Matthew 27:46 says Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 from the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Any Jew who heard this would have known He was quoting David's psalm. It's possible that He muttered the whole psalm under His breath.

Verse 6 says: "But I am a worm and not a man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people." Imagine Jesus reciting these words as a crowd of angry mockers insulted Him as they gathered near the cross.

Verse 14 says: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted inside my body." Some victims of Roman crucifixion took as long as nine days to die, but Jesus' death came in a matter of hours—probably because He had been flogged so cruelly before He was nailed to the rough wood. As He recited Psalm 22, He knew that David's prophetic words were about Him.

Verse 15a says: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws." Victims of crucifixion typically developed serious dehydration because of a lack of blood and oxygen. Jesus felt the thirst that David wrote about.

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Verse 16b-18 says: "They pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots." Jesus' tormentors stripped Him of His clothes, and He bore our shame. John's Gospel tells us that soldiers gambled for his tunic.

Psalm 22 doesn't just predict the pain Jesus experienced. It ends in victory. Verse 22 says:

"I will tell of Your Name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You." Even as Jesus hung in pitiful agony, there was a great expectation of triumph. He praised the Father as He thought of His coming Resurrection.

The last verse of Psalm 22 says: "They will come and will declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has performed it." The original Hebrew in the last phrase ("He has performed it") can be translated, "It is finished." This is exactly what Jesus declared in John 19:30 as He breathed His last! He finished reciting the Psalm before He gave up His spirit.

David's prophetic psalm helped prepare Jesus for His agonizing death. He knew He was the promised Messiah. He knew His destiny was to pour out His blood to atone for the sins of the world. He was willing to endure the pain because of the great joy set before Him.

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