

What Really Happened to Jesus on the Cross?

Jesus “breathed his last” (Mark 15:37b, NIV).

These words describe the end of the most painful suffering of any human being in the history of the world. It is not possible for us to know which was greater for Jesus: His physical suffering, which includes the emotional and bodily torture He endured, or the spiritual suffering, when He was taken by surprise over the Father’s rejection when He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34b).

These words also describe the greatest joy of any human being in the history of the world. The joy consisted of the inexpressible relief from His suffering but also the indescribable ecstasy of seeing His Father at that moment. The writer of Hebrews refers to the latter as “the joy set before him” (b). Looking forward to that joy was partly what kept Him going, giving Him the determined will not to give up before the ordeal was truly over.

What kind of pain did Jesus endure?

Loneliness. Jesus attracted vast audiences, but it was a vacillating following. Five thousand wanted to make Him king (John 6:15), but His teaching resulted in the whole lot deserting Him. Only the 12 disciples stood by Him at that time (John 6:66-69). Jesus had His inner circle—Peter, James and John. He took them with Him on special occasions, including His agonizing time in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37).

Jesus knew in advance that He would suffer death by crucifixion and told this to His disciples (Matt. 20:18-19). He also knew that fulfilling the Law—which no one had ever done but which He promised to do (Matt. 5:17)—meant being

God's sacrificial Lamb. He spoke of finishing the work the Father sent Him to do (John 4:34). As the time of His horrible death drew closer, He said, "For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27b-28a, ESV).

He knew, therefore, that His hardest days were at hand. Judas Iscariot, who became possessed by Satan (John 13:2, 27), betrayed Him. "My soul is very sorrowful," He confided to His inner circle at Gethsemane, showing His emotional pain. "Remain here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). He did not wish for loneliness in this dark hour. But they fell asleep. He said to Peter, "Could you not watch with me for one hour?" (Matt. 26:40b). His loud cries and tears in Gethsemane were directed to His Father, who could save Him from death (Heb. 5:7). He was totally devoted to the Father's will. Succumbing to the fear of man or avoiding the Father's will to avoid suffering was out of the question. However, He did pray that, if at all possible, He might somehow be spared the ordeal that had been destined for Him: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). The "cup" referred to the cross. The cross was God's idea. Jesus did not welcome it. He dreaded it. His agony brought sweat "like great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44b). He tried once, then twice, to get His inner circle to be there for him. But they kept falling asleep. After a third time when pleading with them to stay awake with Him, He gave up. He concluded that not even one of His closest disciples would be there to comfort Him. "Sleep on now," He said to them, "and take your rest" (b, KJV). Sleep on. Any hope of one of them going to the cross with Him was gone.

Moments later, owing to Judas' betrayal, Jesus was arrested by the Jewish authorities. Peter, who tried to prove he was the most faithful of all (John 13:9, 37), denied even knowing Him (John 18:25-27). Indeed, all of His disciples forsook Him and fled (Matt. 26:56).

But the loneliness was suddenly intensified beyond all expectation. As we saw above, even His Father turned His back on Him. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46b).

Silence. "Like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7b). "If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man" (James 3:2b). One of the proofs that Jesus was perfect—that is, without sin—was His self-control with words. Indeed, "he committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth" (1 Pet. 2:22). "He who rules his spirit" is better than "he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32). He was "tempted" (pepeirasomenon, Gr. "tested") just like us, "yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15c).

One unguarded comment or any retort that showed they succeeded in needling Him would have been a sin. They hoped that Jesus would lose control of His Spirit as a consequence of their mocking Him, blindfolding Him, beating Him and demanding He answer them, "Who is it that struck you?" (Luke 22:63-64), would mean Jesus could not be our perfect substitute or sacrifice. Anything or any word that might cause Jesus to lose His temper was hurled at Him. The apostle Paul lost his temper years later when he called the high priest a "whitewashed wall" (Acts 23:3b). But Jesus never—ever—lost His temper or grieved the Holy Spirit by an angry word. King Herod, hoping to see Jesus perform a miracle, questioned Him "at some length," but he "made no answer" (Luke 23:9).

Jesus was tempted to sin right to the end by what He would say. Satan motivated everybody—from Herod to Pilate, from the priests to the Roman soldiers—to catch Jesus with words. The chief priests together with the scribes and elders mocked Him at the cross, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Matt. 27:41-42). "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross" (Mark 15:29b-30). Had He given the true explanation of His words—that He was referring to the temple

of His body (John 2:21)—He would have sinned because that would have been an attempt to clear His name or vindicate Himself. He was in fact “vindicated by the Spirit” (1 Tim. 3:16b).

Jesus’ reply to all that was said to Him and about Him—not to mention what they did to Him—was an utter and brilliant silence. As for the Roman soldiers who literally nailed Him to the cross, Jesus looked to heaven and said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a). Was that a pretentious show or a genuine prayer? It was a genuine prayer to God for them to be forgiven. When Jesus told us to pray for our enemy, He meant for us to pray that they will be blessed! As G. Campbell Morgan put it, “I expect to see in heaven those very men who nailed the nails into Jesus’ hands.”

There was yet another kind of silence Jesus had to accept. He was not allowed to explain to anyone why He let the Jews arrest Him or the Roman soldiers crucify Him. Since He had raised Lazarus from the dead only a few days before, surely He could have stopped the entire crucifixion. He could have called 10,000 angels to stop the whole plan of the Jews to kill him.

If only Jesus could have said something to Mary Magdalene, one of His converts. She was only a few feet away and no doubt perplexed—possibly even feeling betrayed because of what was happening, not to mention sobbing her heart out. If only Jesus had been allowed to say, “Mary, it’s OK, I’m atoning for the sins of the world; all this is God’s plan.” But no. Part of His pain was feeling her pain and watching her grieve without being allowed to comfort her by explaining things.

Bodily pain. The ancient Roman crucifixion is regarded as the worst kind of pain ever devised in the mind of human beings. It was intended to be a gruesome spectacle, the most painful and humiliating death imaginable. For example, the flesh could be ripped off by the whipping before they even started the

crucifixion. The nails were 5-7 inches long. Nails were driven into the wrists for extra pain in a way that caused little bleeding but severe pain. Nails were driven into the ankles to extend the suffering. The cross itself would continue to tear the skin off the victim's back. Gravity was the real executioner: The body hanging was what killed the person. Exposure and dehydration would cause death if all else failed. As the condemned continually pulled himself up to breathe and then released in exhaustion, the person's back would rub up and down against the raw wood of the cross.

The above is an attempt to envisage—in part—what happened to Jesus on the cross.

“We may not know, we cannot tell/ What pains he had to bear;
But we believe it was for us/ He hung and suffered there.”—C.F. Alexander (1818-1895)

Punishment for sin. “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6b). This literally took place on the day Jesus was crucified sometime between noon and 3 p.m. There was an exact moment when He who knew no sin—never having sinned even once—became sin. It is what God intentionally did to His Son. God punished Jesus for what we did. The Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. Surprising as it may seem, it even took Jesus by surprise. It is when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46b).

He knew undergoing crucifixion would be hard. He knew it would be painful. It is what He dreaded most when He was agonizing in Gethsemane with those loud cries and tears. But He was not expecting this: for His own Father to turn His back on Him. He even addressed His Father as “God”—the only time we know of that He addressed Him this way.

It was retributive punishment—God getting even. It was not a gracious judgment, as God showed to King David for his adultery and murder (2). It was God Almighty—the most holy

God—venting His anger toward sin by putting our sin on Jesus and then punishing Him for our sin.

Yes. That is what happened to Jesus on the cross. God punished Jesus for what you and I did.

You could say: “That’s not fair.” Agreed. It was not fair. Jesus did not deserve it. He is the only human being in history who never sinned. And what was the thanks He got for not sinning and perfectly doing His Father’s will and fulfilling the Law? Punishment. It wasn’t fair.

This explains Jesus’ pathos and bewilderment for being abandoned by the Father on the cross: “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [Jesus] we [you and I] might become [by faith] the righteousness of God [in God’s sight] (2 Cor. 5:21).

It was not fair. And yet it was nonetheless pure justice. It is why we have the Bible in a nutshell: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). It took two things to satisfy God’s justice: Jesus’ sinless life plus the shedding of His precious blood. The reason God can be merciful and just at the same time is because Jesus satisfied the justice and wrath of God. God’s wrath was poured out on Jesus. He can now be merciful to us.

At the end of the day, perhaps no one should attempt to grasp fully how awful His spiritual suffering actually was—God’s direct punishment on Jesus. Was it worse than His physical pain? Almost certainly. But we will never know until we get to heaven.

Why did Jesus die? To pay our debt to God—yours and mine. “It is finished”—is the English translation of tetelestai (John 19:30), His words when He “breathed his last” (Luke 23:46b). Tetelestai was also a colloquial expression in the ancient marketplace that meant “paid in full.”

Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36a). It is so easy to forget this. The purpose of Jesus' death was not to bring perfect conditions on earth—whether via politics or gifts of the Spirit; it was to make us fit for heaven. Never forget, too, that we get to heaven only by faith in Jesus' blood. Not by our works. But only by what Jesus did for us on the cross.

"I need no other argument, I need no other plea/ It is enough that Jesus died and that He died for me."—Eliza E. Hewitt (1851-1920) {eoa}

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