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Q&A: The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

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Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Death of Jesus:

Question: What is the nature of death by crucifixion? How does the victim die? Does medical science help us here?

Answer: See the lengthy response to the apparent death theory in the next section below.

Question: Are there any sources aside from Scripture that verify the event of darkness that occurred during the crucifixion of Christ?

Answer: Yes, there are two extra-biblical mentions of the darkness in ancient writings outside the New Testament. In his ancient history, Thallus wrote what is one of the very earliest comments about Jesus, explaining about 52 AD that darkness surrounded at least the Mediterranean world at the time of the crucifixion. Phlegon also wrote of this event. If you have my volume *The Historical Jesus*, you can check pp 196-197 for Thallus and pp 217-218 for Phlegon. In ancient history, two independent sources for an event are often quite evidential. This is because there weren't that many writers and even some major events get very little coverage. Besides, we have the Gospel accounts and they count, too. In total, this amounts to quite a few sources for the darkness. (By the way, on p 218 I also attribute a comment to Phlegon about Jesus' resurrection. My friend and former student, Mike Licon, pointed out to me, properly I think, that Phlegon is not writing about the resurrection in this passage.)

Question: A recent television program stated that Jesus would not have died from breathing difficulties, but from loss of blood. They also said that Jesus was not whipped severely, but was merely whipped lightly. They said that his feet were not laid one over another and then had a nail driven through, but that he most likely had one foot on each side of the cross, and then nails were driven through his ankles, nailing them to the cross. Now, this seems to contradict most of what was said in *The Case for Christ*. The description of the crucifixion and flogging are very different. Which is correct? So what's the deal?

Answer: I am aware of no scholars who think that Jesus died from loss of blood. To say that Jesus only had a light whipping would not explain why he apparently needed help carrying his cross (or portion of the cross). Further, there is no ancient source that says that Jesus only had had a light whipping, while there are several important accounts in the ancient world of very serious whippings. No one knows exactly how Jesus' feet were nailed. If the shroud of Turin is accurate, one foot was probably crossed over the other. But it's impossible to tell for sure.

Question: I have heard that Jesus did not have to be nailed through his wrists because the palms could have supported his weight. Is this correct?

Answer: I have read dozens of medical comments, articles, etc on crucifixion and I have only heard one physician say this. And even his view is not the standard "palm" position. Everyone else I have read agrees that the palms will not work.

Question: Could you remind me about the argument for the "sucking chest" in relation to Jesus' death?

Answer: If Jesus had been pierced through the chest, besides the heart problem, the soldiers and others nearby would have heard a distinct sucking sound coming from the chest wound. This would have indicated, of course, that he was not yet dead and they would have had to finish him off. It's a pretty common wound in wartime or street violence and has to be treated immediately or else the victim dies. So they could simply have walked away, as well. The result would have been the same.

Question: Matthew mentions that some saints came out of their graves when Christ died and appeared to many people in the city of Jerusalem. Surely, this would have been reported by historians or even in the other Gospels. Am I right?

Answer: You raise a good question. Actually, many rather incredible ancient events are not recorded by local historians, while at least Matthew mentions this episode. For those who agreed with Paul that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead in a new body (1 Cor. 15:20), these people were apparently raised in normal bodies, like Lazarus. So they would have looked like normal, everyday people. Perhaps only their friends and loved ones would know for sure that something was going on. On the other hand, the local historians could just say that, "You guys just made this all up—they aren't resurrected!" And remember that Matthew says that the persons who were raised went into the city after Jesus' resurrection (27:53). Since Jesus had risen before this, his resurrection would be the really big news, both because of who he was, regarding both his previous, public ministry, his crucifixion, etc, as well as being raised in a new body. So you could say that Matthew's story was drowned out by a bigger story, like a story that got tucked on the back page of the newspaper because something even bigger had captured the public's attention. Lastly, the question of these raised people, regardless of what happened, does nothing to contradict or otherwise oppose the resurrection accounts.

Question: Are not most of the New Testament reports concerning the death of Jesus taken from later sources, therefore minimizing the fact that Jesus actually died at the hands of Pontius Pilate?

Answer: Here is a list of early creedal texts that mention the death of Jesus along with a few details: These texts include Luke 24:34; 1 Cor 11:26; Rom 4:25; Phil 2:8; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Pet 3:18, along with the Acts sermon summaries (2:22-36; 3:13-16; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-43; 13:28-31; 17:1-3, 30-31 in particular). All of these texts are early. Critics place especially 1 Cor 11:26, 1 Cor 15:3-4, and the Acts passages in the 30s AD.

Question: In one of your recorded lectures on evidence for the resurrection, you mention an American doctor who conducted crucifixion experiments in the 1950s. Can you give me the name of the doctor or refer me to a publication of his experiment?

Answer: Here's some information that may be helpful regarding your crucifixion question. Two sources that I know of are Dr. Frederick Zugibe, *The Cross and the Shroud: A Medical Examiner Investigates the Crucifixion* (Cresskill, NJ: McDonagh & Co., 1981), with photos on pp. 102-

107, and Dr. Hermann Moedder's research, as reported in David Wilcox's book *Shroud* (NY: Macmillan, 1977), especially pp. 23-25, 161. (A photo of Moedder's work appears on p. 25.) Both Zugibe and Moedder differ on the final cause of death in a crucifixion victim, but have some major similarities.