

CRUCIFIXION

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Christians today see the cross as a symbol of salvation by divine grace. So did the earliest Christians two millennia ago. Paul would write, "But far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Crucifixion was anything but rare in the ancient world. After defeating Tyre, Alexander the Great crucified 2,000 along the Mediterranean shore. Alexander Jannaeus, king of Judea about 80 years before Jesus was born, is said to have crucified 800 Pharisees who rebelled against him.

Rome perfected crucifixion to a science, if not an art form. In 71 B.C., along the Appian Way, 6,000 followers of Spartacus were crucified in a victory celebration. When the Roman General Titus laid siege to Jerusalem (about 40 years after Jesus' death), he was crucifying Jews at the staggering rate of 500 or more per day. Jewish historian Josephus writes, incredibly, that the Romans nailed the Jews on crosses in various positions "by way of jest." It went on to the point they ran out of space for crosses, and ran out of crosses for new victims.

That Jesus should die by crucifixion was not unique, but the early church's perspective on crucifixion was absolutely unique. It related, of course, not to just any cross, but to one in particular. The idea that anyone could love or glory in a cross would have been anathema prior to the gospel. Then again, the gospel changed a lot of thinking.

Before Christ, crucifixion had a gruesome history associated with nothing pleasant, much less with forgiveness of sins. It was the *summa supplicium* (Latin for "supreme penalty"), reserved for the worst offenders. A later Roman jurist, Julius Paulus, writing around the beginning of the third century, indicated there were three supreme penalties: beheading, burning, and crucifixion (the latter being the most terrible of all).

Being nailed to a cross and left to hang until death was such a horrific means of execution that, as a general rule, Roman citizens were exempt from facing it. Such a humiliating and agonizing demise was reserved for those guilty of murder, banditry, treason, desertion, sedition, and the like. According to Cicero, the statesman who died about 40 years before Jesus was born, "Far be the very name of a cross, not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens." Thus, a Roman cross, now cherished by millions, was, at one time, not a subject fit for polite Roman conversation.

Josephus, witness to many a crucifixion, called it "the most wretched of deaths." And Seneca, born about the same time as Jesus, offered this insight: "Is anyone found who, after being fastened to that accursed wood, already weakened, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, with many reasons for dying even before getting to the cross, would wish to prolong a life-breath that is about to experience so many torments?" To top it all, the law of God, given through Moses, itself placed a curse on anyone put to death by hanging on a tree (Deut. 21:22-23).

In a world where life could be cheap and death came in many varieties, why was crucifixion so despised? It robbed whatever dignity one had left, forcing the naked victim to endure pulsing pain in a public venue as an object lesson, often with ridicule and verbal abuse thrown in for good measure. By design, it was a lingering death. Some lived on a cross for days, exposed to humiliation, the elements, insects, and birds before finally expiring. After a brutal beating, Jesus

lasted six hours on the cross (cf. Mark 15:25, 44; Luke 23:44-46). Excruciating is an English word for intense suffering. It comes from the Latin word *excruciates*, which literally means "out of the cross." It was not just any death that Jesus endured, and we should be in awe that "being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

The concept of crucifixion was so odious to first-century sensibilities that people refused to believe a Savior could have been subjected to it. "The Old Rugged Cross," so often preached and sung about, was a huge obstacle in the thinking of many. A victim of crucifixion did not fit the mold of the Messiah most Jews were looking for. And Gentiles of the Roman world found it difficult to embrace as a risen Savior someone who had died so despicably.

Opponents of Christianity even pointed to the cross as evidence Jesus was not divine. Minucius Felix, an early Latin writer, accused Christians of worshipping "a criminal and his cross." No wonder Paul would state that "we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

Before there could be Christ's resurrection, there had to be his crucifixion. We can scarcely imagine the initial misery of the act, and the subsequent difficulty of explanation in convincing the masses of what had just happened, in light of an ingrained prejudice against anything associated with a cross. "For the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

Paul, who had been "baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3:27), so identified with Jesus that he could say "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). Who but God could turn a hated means of death into a beloved symbol of everlasting life?