

## **Imagery in The Passion of the Messiah**

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*Abstract: Our world is filled with images of the crucifixion of Jesus. When measured against the plumb line of scripture, these images are often revealed to be quite inaccurate. Jesus' suffering was much greater than we often recognize. This article will observe the passion of Christ from the perspective of the writer of the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew and review it in the light of Old Testament prophesy, our knowledge of Roman/Palestinian history, and our understanding of the physiology associated with the crucifixion. We will see that our response to Jesus should be far more than casual and nothing less than life-changing.*

Imagine for a moment that you are taken back in time to that dark Friday afternoon when Christ was crucified. You are standing at the rear of the crowd, and you are able to see the Roman guards coming up the narrow street leading out of the city. They are accompanying the three men who are to be crucified. You hear the shout of the guard as he conscripts a spectator to carry the cross of one of the prisoners. It seems that this prisoner's appearance is much different from the others. He has been beaten to the point that He is only vaguely recognizable as human in form. While the crowd is shouting insults and spitting on the prisoners, they are led up to a hill outside of the gates where the prisoners are crucified. There are three prisoners; three crosses. Two of them are tied to their crosses as is normally done. However, the third prisoner, the one who was so severely beaten, is treated with particular cruelty, fastened to the cross by large, square, iron nails pounded through his wrists and feet. As the crucifixion of these three prisoners is taking place, the sky is growing ever darker. You sense a strange chill in the air. You can feel that this is no ordinary Roman execution.

It was a sunny Spring morning (very unusual in central up-state New York) when I was driving an automobile out of the village of New Hartford on Middle Settlement Road towards the village of Yorktown when my eyes were diverted to a small cemetery on the left side of the road. Only about 60 feet across at the street, the cemetery continued back several hundred feet, presenting to the viewer the appearance of a tombstone-littered bowling alley. What caught my attention was a single and quite large shrine located about half-way back. It was a larger than life-size marble or concrete sculpture depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. This is not an unusual sight in an area where the Catholic church claims about 65% of the local population as its members. The people in the region are predominantly Italian, Polish, Slavic, Russian and Eastern European in

ancestry.

Something about this crucifix really caught my attention. First of all, it was painted. Most crucifixes are molded or carved from a solid material and unadorned. Second, the appearance of Christ on the Cross was rather vivid. The skin color was an unblemished light flesh-tone with a little blood on the palms, on the feet, on the sword wound on the side, and a slight dripping of blood under a crown of thorns. What struck me was the tragic error of this image. I was quickly and vividly reminded of the third commandment recorded in the book of Exodus:

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (Exodus 20:4, KJV)

What has this commandment to do with sculptures, paintings, and other artwork that depict the life, ministry and atoning death of Jesus? Was it not commanded to forbid idol worship? First, none of the artwork that depicts New Testament scenes is accurate. Unlike other leaders of His day, Jesus was never depicted in any paintings or sculptures produced by first-hand witnesses. This may have been due to a lack of artisans in the fellowship of believers. It also may have been due to the Jewish disdain for religious art because of fears of breaking the commandment in Exodus 20:4. Another reason could have been that Jesus was an average looking man. Consider the prophesy that describes the physical appearance of the Messiah:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (Isaiah 53:2, KJV).

If all existing artwork that depicts New Testament events is inaccurate, we can only draw incorrect conclusions from it. Finally, even if we had first-hand witnesses as artisans, no artwork can fully display God's glory. All we can do is make a cheap imitation that

attempts to portray a small part of what we see when we perceive what to us is an image of Christ. The only way for us to gain a more accurate view of the truth is to put away the visual images we have received from sculptures, paintings, movies, and other art forms, and try to see those images from a scriptural perspective as given to us by the only source of truth, the Word of God. If we research the scriptures and study them in the context of known historical customs in ancient Rome and Palestine, we come away with a vivid, and quite different, image.

Let us observe the passion of Christ from the perspective of the writer of the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew and review it in the light of Old Testament prophesy, our knowledge of Roman history, and our understanding of the physiology associated with the crucifixion.

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children, (Matthew 27:24-25, KJV.)

What had taken place up to this point?

- Jesus had entered triumphantly into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.
- Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas were all in town because of the presence of the crowds and their consequent potential for staging riots against Rome.
- Judas had betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities who sought to remove His influence.
- The Jews had arrested Jesus, tried Him before Annas, Caiaphas, and the Sanhedrin, and had now handed Jesus over to the Roman governor who alone held the authority to execute the capital punishment the Jews wanted, (John 18:31.) Caiaphas would be careful to do this correctly since Annas lost his position as High Priest because he

disobeyed the Roman prohibition on Jewish executions for offenses against Rome.

(Gundry, Robert H. (1994). A Survey of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, pp. 202.)

Let's note for a moment who Jesus is.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men, (John 1:1-4, KJV.)

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me, (John 1:14-15, KJV.)

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, (Hebrews 1:1-3a, KJV.)

If someone from outside the context of the setting were to view what was happening during these few days in Jerusalem, the events would appear to be highly illogical. We have here the very God of creation, the Christ, the Messiah being willingly subjected by vile and wicked men to torture and death.

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified, (Matthew 27:26, KJV.)

What is stated here is simple and short. There is little need for an in-depth discussion in the scripture because the people of their day were very acquainted with the treatment referred to as scourging or flogging, and with the cruel execution by crucifixion.

**SCOURGE** (*skuhuhrge*) A severe form of corporal punishment involving whipping and beating, usually was done with the victim tied to a post or bench and administered by a servant of the synagogue (if for religious reasons), or by a slave or soldier... The number of blows was set in Deuteronomy 25:3 at forty, but later reduced to thirty-nine. There were to be thirteen stokes on the chest and twenty-six on the back. Often the victim died from the beating, (Holman Bible Dictionary, Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991.)

The instrument used in the scourging is a short cluster of whips. Often referred to as a cat-o-nine-tails, each whip has a sharp thong of bone or metal attached to the end of it. When struck across the body it would tear off the upper layer of skin in a strip a couple of inches wide. This treatment is where the phrase "beat within an inch of your life" comes from.

At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then as the blows continue they cut into the subcutaneous tissue, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and then spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscle. The small balls first produce large, deep bruises which are broken open by subsequent blows. Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. (Davis, C.T. (1997). The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Web Site.)

Jesus was struck thirty-nine times with the scourging whip, safely one less than Jewish law allows, either in a circle around His chest consistent with Jewish custom, or across the back, thighs and legs, as is Roman custom. This exposes a glaring error in most illustrations of the crucifixion. Jesus' body was literally covered with bleeding bruises and immense cuts from the scourging. The blood would have covered Jesus' body from the neck down to His feet.

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again,

(Matthew 27:27-30, KJV.)

And the men that held Jesus mocked him, and smote *him*. And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote thee? (Luke 22:63-64, KJV.)

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7, KJV.)

I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting, (Isaiah 50:6, KJV.)

Roman guards took particular vengeance on this one prisoner who was different from most they dealt with. He was presented to them as a King who was in conflict with their Roman authority, not an entirely incorrect assessment as Jesus is truly the King who is in conflict with this sin-infested world.

The Roman soldiers see a great joke in the provincial Jew considered by some to be a king. They throw a robe across His shoulders and place a stick in His hand as a scepter. They still need a crown to make their travesty complete. A small bundle of flexible branches covered with long thorns, (commonly used for firewood) are plaited into the shape of a crown and this pressed into His scalp. ... After mocking Him and striking Him in the face, the soldiers take the stick from His hand and strike Him in the head, driving the thorns deep into His scalp. Finally, they tire of their sadistic sport and the robe is torn from His back. This had already become adherent to the clots of blood and serum in the wounds, and its removal, just as the careless removal of a surgical dressing, causes excruciating pain, almost as if He were again being whipped and the wounds again begin to bleed. (Ibid, Davis.)

The results of that severe beating were evident to all who saw Him come up the road leading to the hill of Galgotha, where He was to be crucified. Jesus was so badly beaten that the scripture records that He was disfigured more than any man, and His form was almost inhuman. This is quite a contrast to the modern-day image of the crucifix that illustrates an attractive man who is blemished with a few scattered drops of blood.

As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men. So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider, (Isaiah 52:14-15, KJV)

If we were to see a true image of Jesus at this point, we would be astonished and appalled at the mutilation He had been subjected to.

And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him. And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross, (Matthew 27:31-32, KJV)

Why, do you suppose that a spectator was called to carry Jesus' cross, yet no similar reference is made indicating that the other two prisoners received this service? Since Jesus had been so severely beaten, He had lost a large amount of blood already. He was so weak that He did not have the strength left to carry the patibulum, the horizontal section of the cross that typically weighs over 100 pounds. He probably would not have survived the trip up the hill without this assistance. The Romans would have missed out on the bloodthirsty execution yet to come, and the prophesy of the crucifixion would not have been fulfilled.

And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull. They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink, (Matthew 27:33-34, KJV)

The manner of Christ's crucifixion was particularly gruesome. The method of crucifixion seems to have been limited only by the materials available and the creativity of the executioners. (Halbrook, G.K. (1990, Winter) Roman Crucifixion. Biblical Illustrator. 16(2). 2-10.) Rather than being tied to the cross as was done with the other two prisoners, Jesus was nailed to the cross through the wrists and feet. Standing in this position was pure torture since He could not relieve the pain by either pulling himself up by the hands or lifting himself up with His legs. Some of those there, knowing the agony of this ordeal offered him wine mixed with an analgesic gall or myrrh. This act served

only to continue the mockery directed at Jesus through this entire process.

Though His enemies mock His Kingship and Sonship, Matthew presents their mockery as ironically true: not only the robing of Jesus and the crowning Him with thorns, but also the putting of a reed in his right hand and the kneeling before Him; not only hailing Him as the “King of the Jews,” but also the wording of the inscription, “This is the King of the Jews,” and of the gibe, “He is the King of Israel,” plus two occurrences of God’s Son.” The spitting mocks Jesus’ robe, the hitting of His head with a reed mocks His crown. The mixing of wine and gall gives the wine a bitter taste and insults Jesus with a drink that first seems merciful but turns out cruel. (Ibid, Gundry, page 202.)

The agony associated with this form of crucifixion cannot be understated.

At this point, another phenomenon occurs. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With the cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward, the pectoral muscles become paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself to get one short breath after another. ... Jesus endures hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, interspersed with partial asphyxiation, and searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as he presses up and down against the rough timber; then another agony begins. A deep, crushing pain begins to build in the chest as the pericardium slowly begins to fill with the serum and begins to compress the heart. (Ibid, Davis.)

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. (Psalm 22:14-18, KJV)

As great as the torture and agony were, the greatest agony was yet to come.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46, KJV.)

What prompted Jesus to say this? From the fall, man has continued in his nature of sin with no hope of atonement. Throughout the Old Testament we see practices of offerings of property, produce, and blood to atone for sins. However, no sin that was willfully

committed was atonable in this manner. The blood offerings given in the Old Testament were as a prophesy to the final blood offering that was to take place on the cross, and only through that offering was the atoning for willful sin available. When David willfully sinned by first taking Bathsheba as his adulterous wife, and then murdering her husband, he did not revert to any form of sacrifice to atone for it. He knew there was none. He pleaded with God not to leave him and to restore to him the joy of the salvation he previously knew, (Psalm 51.) God had not provided to the children of Israel a way for such atonement, but had shown them the way that He would ultimately provide through the illustrations of the blood sacrifices: that a Messiah would come to provide the atonement that man cannot attain on his own.

When Jesus hung on the cross, He experienced a sensation that He had never known for all of eternity. There has been much speculation as to why Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me.” Some feel that Jesus was quoting from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm to communicate the depth of His suffering (Justin the Martyr, AD 110-165.) Some see this as an illustration of the length that God would go to identify with mankind by actually feeling forsaken as we so often feel. (Moltmann, J. (1973). The Crucified God. New York: Harper and Row Publishers. pp 146-153.) I would take Moltmann’s position a step further, stating the Jesus did not just feel forsaken, but was indeed totally forsaken by God, the Father. As part of the Godhead, Jesus is in eternal communication with it. He is part of it. However, at this one point in eternity He was vicariously positioned as the blood sacrifice for all sins for all time past, present and future, and as such was receiving the penalty for that sin: the very definition of death, separation from God. Jesus must have felt a loneliness and abandonment beyond anything we can ever comprehend. This made the burden of the sin He carried far more painful than any of the

physical torture He had previously received.

Because of the intensity of that physical torture, Jesus did not survive on the cross very long. After three hours of partial asphyxiation and pericardial congestion, His heart finally gave out. One could almost say that Jesus died of a broken heart. He died while the other prisoners watched, and God's back was turned.

We can only dimly see the significance of the torture experienced by Jesus. We will probably never really comprehend the gravity of that torture and the pain and suffering Jesus humbly bore on our behalf. Jesus' death was no mere martyrdom.

It was a sacrifice for the sins of the human race. This was God's way of providing remission of sins, of restoring broken fellowship, and of producing a righteous people. Understanding this truth about the cross brings awareness of God's love in its infinite depth and goodness. (Hogue, C.B. (1978). The Doctrine of Salvation. Nashville, TN: Convention Press. Page 59)

What would your response be to someone who gave their life to save yours? What would your response be to someone who suffered in this manner, dying an agonizing death to give you life? God, through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, has not called mankind to join a social club. We have been called to a relationship with Himself; we have been called to:

1. Be saved by accepting Jesus as Lord.

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved, (Romans 10:9, KJV.)

2. Be ministers of the Gospel.

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light, (1 Peter 2:9, KJV.)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven, (Matthew 5:16, KJV.)

As His ministers we are all to use the abilities and gifts He has given us for the

furtherance of His kingdom. Take a look at the commission we have received:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

- Go ye therefore, and
- teach all nations,
- baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
- Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen, (Matthew 28:18-20, KJV.)

This commission is given to all who will follow Jesus, the Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile. Paul states this in his letter to the Romans:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, (Romans 1:16, KJV.)

When we witness the images of Christ that artists have prepared for us, let us never forget the true gravity of His suffering, an agony that these illustrations cannot describe. Also, let us never forget the consequent responsibility we have to the Lord to be His ministers, seeking to grow in the knowledge of him and seeking to be better servants in God's kingdom. Let us never fail to thank God that Jesus rose again in victory from that gruesome death, offering salvation from that same death to all who trust in Him. Finally, let us take every opportunity to tell others of the good news of the risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

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