

Sermon for Friday, April 13, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"DEATH ROMAN STYLE - LIFE GOD STYLE"

St. Matthew 27:24-50

Text: "And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit".

St. Matthew 27:50

We have made the cross into something lovely. Some of you tonight are wearing crosses around your necks or on your lapels and I have two embroidered on my robe, plus one hanging around my neck. That means that the cross and what happened on it are somehow central to our faith. Take away the cross and you take away the very meaning of Jesus. According to tradition, on this day, Good Friday, (which, incidentally, is a corruption of God's Friday) Jesus was crucified. Since easy familiarity with the cross has caused us to lose something of its awfulness, tonight I would like to share something special with you. I would like to share with you a doctor's analysis of the death of Jesus. Dr. C. Truman Davis has done a painstaking study of the whole process of the physical death of Jesus. From a medical standpoint, the physical death of Jesus was an incredible ordeal. Tonight I would like for us to be reminded of that terrible suffering that Jesus endured in his body. It does not take into account the far worse spiritual agony he went through when God, as it were, turned his face from him who became sin for our sake. That is beyond imagining and that suffering is reflected in the agonizing cry of Jesus from the cross, "Why hast thou forsaken me?"

But the physical suffering itself was terrible enough. Let me share it with you. First, the cross itself. In all likelihood, it is what was called a "Tau" cross shaped like our capital "T". The upright part, called the stipes, was permanently fixed in the ground with a notch at the top. The cross-arm, called the patibulum weighed about 110 pounds and fitted into the notched top of the stipes. The condemned man was forced to carry this cross-arm from the prison to the place of execution.

The physical passion or agony of Jesus began in the Garden of Gethsemane. There we are told he sweat drops of blood as he agonized in prayer. Many have tried to explain away this ordeal under the impression it cannot happen. Now, medical literature describes this rare phenomenon of Hematidrosis. It is well-documented that under great emotional stress, tiny capillaries in the sweat glands can break, thus mixing blood with sweat. This would have produced marked weakness and possible shock. In the garden Jesus was arrested and in the middle of the night brought before the Sanhedrin and Caiaphas, the High Priest. Here the first physical trauma was inflicted. A soldier struck Jesus across the face for remaining silent when questioned by Caiaphas. The palace guards then blindfolded him and taunted him to identify them as they passed by, spitting on him and striking him in the face. By early morning Jesus is already suffering. He is dehydrated from the hematidrosis, he is bruised and battered, and he is exhausted from a sleepless night. Now he is taken across Jerusalem to the Praetorium of the Fortress Antonia, the seat of Roman government in Judea.

Pilate attempts to pass responsibility for Jesus to Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Judea, but Herod sends Jesus back. Now, Pilate prepares to scourge Jesus as his full punishment in the hopes that this will satisfy the Jews. In preparation for scourging, the prisoner is stripped of his clothing and his hands tied to a post above his head. While the Jewish law had a limit on how many times the prisoner could be struck (40 less one to be sure the limit was not exceeded), but the Romans had no such law. The Roman legionnaire--or perhaps two of them, one working from either side--steps forward with the flagrum in his hand. This is a short whip with several heavy, leather thongs with two small balls of lead attached near the ends of each. The heavy whip or whips is brought down across

the shoulders, back and legs of Jesus again and again. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the whipping goes on, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles. The small balls of lead 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. When it is determined that Jesus is near death, the beating is finally stopped. Jesus is cut down and he slumps to the pavement wet with his own blood. The Roman soldiers think it is a great joke to see this pitiful mass of flesh claiming to be the Jewish king. Taking a robe they put it across his shoulders and put a stick in his hand for a scepter. Some thorny branches used to start fires are plaited into the shape of a crown and pressed into his scalp. Because the scalp is one of the most vascular areas of the body, copious bleeding occurs. After mocking him and striking him across the face, they take the stick from his hand and strike him across the head, driving the thorns deeper into his scalp. Finally, tiring of their sadistic sport, they rip the robe from his back. Already the clotting blood and serum in the wounds has stuck to the robe and like the careless removal of a surgical bandage it causes excruciating pain as the wounds are torn open and begin to bleed again.

Since the Jews are not satisfied with scourging, Pilate now gives the order for execution by crucifixion. The heavy patibulum of the cross is tied across his shoulders and the execution detail of Roman soldiers moves out to the hill of crucifixion. Jesus tries to walk erect, but the physical shock he has endured along with the weight of the cross-arm is too much. He stumbles and falls. The rough wood of the beam cuts into the lacerated skin and muscles of the shoulders. He tries to rise, but human muscles have been pushed beyond their endurance. Anxious to get on with it, the Romans take a man from the crowd to carry the patibulum. Thus, the name of Simon of Cyrene is indelibly etched in history. Jesus staggers on bleeding, and his body now covered with cold, clammy sweat of shock

With the cross-arm on the ground, Jesus is thrown backward with his shoulders against the wood. The legionnaire takes a hand and feels for the depression at the front of the wrist. The nail is to be driven between the small bones of the wrists and not through the palms. Nails driven through the palms will strip out between the fingers when they support the full weight of a human body. Anatomists, both modern and ancient, have always considered the wrists as part of the hand. Finding the depression he is looking for, the legionnaire drives a heavy, square, wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. He moves to the other arm and repeats the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly. Then the soldiers pick up the patibulum and lift it into place at the top of the stipes. A sign on a short stick called a titulus is then nailed to the top of the stipes. It reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Now the left foot is pressed down and a nail driven through the arch. It is placed over the right foot and the nail driven through that foot and into the wood with the knees moderately flexed. The crucifixion is complete.

As Jesus sags down, the nails in the wrist take the weight of his body. Excruciating fiery pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain--the nails are putting pressure on the median nerves. As he pushes himself up to avoid the torment, his full weight is placed on the nail in his feet. Again, there is the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the metatarsal bones of the feet.

Now another phenomenon occurs: As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push himself upward. Hanging by his arms, the pectoral muscles are 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 in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, he is able to push himself upward to exhale and bring in the life giving oxygen. His seven utterances from the cross are all short because he has little breath to speak.

Now another agony begins. A crushing pain deep in the chest begins as the sack around the heart, the pericardium, slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart. It is almost over. The loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level. The compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The markedly dehydrated tissues send their flood of stimuli to the brain. It is at this point our saviour cries out, "I thirst." The body of Jesus is now in extremis and he can feel the chill of death creeping through his flesh. Realizing this, he chokes out a tortured whisper, "it is finished." His mission of atonement is finished and now he can allow his body to die. With one final surge of strength, he presses his torn feet against the nail, straightens his legs, takes a final deep breath and cries out, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

Finally, the legionnaire drives his lance through the fifth interspace between the ribs, upward through the pericardium into the heart. Watery fluid from the sac surrounding the heart and blood from the interior of the heart flow out, post-mortem evidence that Jesus died not by suffocation, but by heart failure due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium.

So that's how one dies, Roman style. The physical agony was incredible. Who can imagine what the spiritual suffering was like when Jesus was separated from God because he became sin for our sakes. His desolate cry from the cross, "why has thou forsaken me" gives us a small clue to the agony of his soul. Well, that's what it was like, Roman style. That's what he endured for you and for me. He took our place and died our death.

God says, if we will accept it, he will take the suffering of Jesus as a substitute for our punishment. If we will receive it, he will give us eternal life. We will be accounted righteous, forgiven, for his sake.

Will you receive that free gift? Jesus says, this is my body broken for you--this is my blood shed for you. If you will receive it, you are forgiven--you have life, God style.