

Andrew K. Frey

Good Friday

Matthew 27:33

They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). (NIV 84)

Theme: Golgotha—The place of the Skull.

There are many different ways to execute a criminal. The most common today is lethal injection. The electric chair was quite popular for awhile; as was death by hanging, a firing squad, or by guillotine. Most of these ways are more humane and less painful than ways of execution in the past. Burning at the stake comes to mind. Or stoning, which was a common Jewish practice. Dismemberment was also used on a regular basis. The human mind can come up with some horrific ways to put someone to death.

For Rome, the common way of executing someone was crucifixion. While they didn't invent crucifixion, they did perfect it. We don't know exactly how prevalent crucifixions were—but they were quite common. Sometimes they even performed mass executions—hundreds of them a day!

A crucifixion was an excruciating process to say the least. It typically started with the flogging. The idea was to crack a few ribs with large balls of lead and to rip open the back with sharp pieces of bone or metal—thus exposing the flesh and cause a considerable amount of bleeding. Flogging was so horrible that it was known to kill a criminal from time to time.

After the flogging the person to be executed was forced to carry his own cross—as Jesus was. It most likely wasn't the whole cross but just the cross beam, which would have weighed 75-100 pounds by itself. Roman soldiers, headed by a centurion led the criminals through the streets of the city. A sign went before them indicating to everyone what he was being crucified for. This sign was then placed above his head.

Reaching the place of crucifixion, the criminal was held down while long spikes were nailed into his hands, or wrists. He was then lifted up onto the main pole. His legs were then held down and nailed to the pole—one on top of the other.

Death by crucifixion was often just as long as it was excruciating. Because of the way the body was positioned on the cross breathing was difficult. One would have to push up using his hands and his

Holy Cross, Standish, MI.

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feet—where were nailed down, so that he would be able to exhale. And since he was beaten and flogged blood started piling up in his lungs which needed to be coughed up and spit out. Overtime he became too exhausted to lift himself up to breathe or cough and spit out the blood. Eventually—perhaps over the course of a couple days he would suffocate to death on his own blood.

Death by crucifixion was a horrible way to die. It was so bad that it was illegal to crucify a Roman Citizen. The Roman statesman Cicero called it "the most cruel and disgusting penalty" and "the most extreme penalty." The Jewish historian Josephus, called it "the most wretched of deaths."

That is the death Jesus endured—willingly. He knew all of this. He was well aware of the physical pain he would endure. And yet he willingly faced it. As God, he didn't have to. He had all the power in the world. He didn't have to be arrested, or blindfolded, or beaten, or crowned with thorns. He could have turned the tables and flogged Pilate. And Pilate would have been powerless to stop him. Instead of walking all the way up to his death, Jesus could have turned the other way and simply walked through the crowd—much like he did outside of Nazareth when they tried to throw him off of a cliff. The only reason why Jesus was crucified is because he let the soldiers do so. When Jesus was nailed to the cross the people mocked him. **“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.** Of course we know that Jesus could have saved himself. He could have come down off of the cross. But Jesus didn't stop the process. He didn't turn the tables. He willingly went toward his death. He willingly suffered and died. Jesus obeyed the Lord by not doing anything. He put aside his divine power so that he could suffer and die in order to forgive and save us.

Typically a large city would have a designated area where all the crucifixions were carried out. It would have been in a highly visible place just outside the city walls. It would have been by a road so that all those going in and out of the city could see the execution. For Jerusalem, Golgotha was the place where the executions took place.

The Bible never says where Golgotha was located, so we aren't quite sure. Matthew does tell us that the Aramaic term, Golgotha, means the place of the skull—or perhaps simply the skull. There are different theories as to how it received that name. Some believe that this place got its name it actually looked like a skull. In fact there is a hill—just outside of Jerusalem that has caves on the side that make it look like a skull. But others believe that this location received its name because of what took place on it. Executions. Thousands upon thousands of criminals were put to death at Golgotha. It was became closely connected with death. Thus the name, “the place of the skull.”

Jesus wasn't the first person to be executed at Golgotha. And he wasn't the last. In fact Jesus was executed with two other men. Both of them were thieves or robbers. One was on his left and the other on his right. Perhaps Jesus took the place of Barabbas. He was treated just like any other criminal. They acted as if he had committed some horrible and disgusting crime like the hundreds of thousands who went before and followed after him. Of course, we know that Jesus never once committed a crime. Not once did he sin or go against God's Word. He was completely innocent. And yet we see him up on the cross—suffering.

But he wasn't just suffering through physical pain. No he was suffering for our sins. Just think of some of the sins you have committed. How horrible you felt afterward. You got that sinking feeling. You sinned against the Lord—you did what was wrong and detestable in his sight. The weight of you sins weighed heavy upon you. They seemed to overwhelm you. But then think about the sins of the whole world. That's what Jesus suffered through. The sins of the whole world were upon his shoulders. He took them upon himself. And became guilty of everything you have done wrong. And not just you—but Jesus also became guilty of all the murders, rapes, beatings, kidnappings, unbelief, and so on. The weight of the world's sins weighed heavy upon him.

Jesus became a sinner in our place. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.** And so he suffered for our sins. Isaiah says in chapter 59, **your iniquities have separated**

you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. Before, Jesus had no sin. He was at one with the Father—they are co-equal and co-eternal. Yet Jesus took our sins upon himself.

And so he was rejected by God. God turned his face on his own son. The sins that we committed separated Jesus from the Father. And this caused Jesus to have more pain than any damage that the Romans could have done. That is why Jesus cried out, **My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?** At that moment Jesus suffered through the pain and agony of hell. While he was on the cross Jesus paid for the price of eternal damnation that our sins deserve so that we wouldn't have to.

And then he died. Jesus, the almighty and eternal God, died. And he didn't die a normal crucifixion death. As I mentioned earlier, normally someone would suffocate to death when they were crucified. But when Jesus died we read that he said in a loud voice—**it is finished.** And **Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.** Then he breathed his last. Jesus gave up his spirit—willingly. That's because his work was finished. His job of saving us was complete. The Greek word that is translated, “it is finished” was often used in the marketplace. It was a bill of sale. Sort of like saying, “paid in full.” Jesus paid our price in full. His work of saving us—his work as our Savior, was finished. He had done all he needed to do and then he died.

The Roman centurion present on Golgotha that day had seen thousands of crucifixions. But this one was different. Perhaps it was the darkness that covered the whole land, or the earthquake that took place right when Jesus died. He noticed that Jesus wasn't an ordinary criminal. His death wasn't an ordinary death. So he confessed, **surely this man was the Son of God.** The Centurion was right of course—except one thing. Jesus is the Son of God, and God himself. Jesus wasn't was. Jesus is because Jesus didn't remain dead. As we know Jesus still lives. For in a few days we celebrate his victory over death. All of this needed to take place. The perfect life, the suffering, the death, the resurrection. It needed to happen for us to be saved. Jesus needed to be true God and true man so that we might have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. So Jesus willing walked toward

Golgotha. He willingly took the world's sins upon himself. He willingly suffered and died for them. And that includes your sins. They don't have to weigh upon you. He suffered through those sins for you. They have been removed and paid for by our Lord and Savior's suffering and death on top Golgotha. Amen.