

Excruciating Love

Chances are you have heard someone describe pain they are experiencing as “excruciating.” You may be familiar with excruciating pain yourself. It may not surprise you, then to learn that the word “excruciating” comes directly from the Latin word *excruciates* which means, “out of the cross.” When someone describes pain as excruciating, they’re really saying that it is like being crucified.

It’s hard to imagine a more painful way to die than crucifixion. And yet, one thing I fear is that Jesus’ death on the cross has become a type of Christian cliché. You hear it so often: “Jesus died for your sins.” Those words can be spoken so easily. Could it be possible that we’ve become numb to the crucifixion of Jesus? I pray not. The greatest act of love is displayed by the man on that cross. In Jesus’ bloody death lies our salvation. In Jesus’ crucifixion lies our escape from the pit of hell. Let’s not be in a hurry to leave the scene of the cross.

Although the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they perfected it as a means of capital punishment. It was designed to produce a slow death with a maximum of pain and suffering. In some places, it was customary to tie the crucified to the crossbar with ropes. The Romans preferred to use nails. Archaeological digs have indicated that these nails were tapered, square-shafted iron spikes about 5 to 7 inches long. With arms outstretched, but not taut, the wrists were nailed to the crossbar. The driven nail would crush or sever the large median nerve, producing bolts of fiery pain in both arms.

The feet were usually fixed to the front of the cross, and again, the Roman practice was

to use an iron spike. The knees would be bent. The spike was placed on top of the leading foot between the second and the third toe, and the blow was delivered.

The major effect of crucifixion, beyond the blinding pain, was a tremendous interference with normal breathing. The weight of the body, pulling down on the outstretched arms and shoulders, would fix the muscles in an inhaling state. In order to exhale, one would have to push up on the feet and flex the elbows and shoulders. That move would put the entire weight of the body on the feet and cause searing pain. The wrists would also pay a terrible price for that maneuver. Each effort at breathing would become more agonizing and exhausting and would eventually lead to asphyxiation. If the crucified lingered on too long, the executioners could speed the process considerably by breaking the legs below the knees, which is what happened to the thieves on either side of Jesus.

This is the sickening reality behind the words, “Jesus died for your sins.” We’re talking about iron spikes, forged in human sin, causing catastrophic damage to Jesus’ body. We’re talking about his muscles straining beneath the suffocating weight of our disobedience. At the moment of Jesus crucifixion and death, all of the righteous anger of God against sin was focused on his Son with laser precision. Jesus heart may have been pierced by the spear of the Roman guard, but it was already broken. “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me” is both fulfillment of prophecy and the uncensored expression of Jesus’ heartbreak, as the full consequence of my sin falls on him.

Can I hear this and allow it to pass into the realm of “ho-hum, Jesus died for you?”

Can I hear this and not grieve? Grieve for Jesus, sure, but even more so, grieve the fact that my sin caused this horrible event? My sin nailed him to that cross.

Can I hear this and not be moved to say: “It should have been me. I deserved this punishment, not Jesus. I know what I have done—the temptations I’ve given into; the terrible ways I’ve treated people; the greed and the lusts that consume me. I know what I haven’t done: I haven’t loved my neighbor as I do myself; I haven’t fulfilled my responsibilities to my family; nor have I put God first in every area of my life or come close to serving him as I ought. It’s only right that I should pay for those sins; for all my sin. It should be me.”

And God says: “No. My Son will pay for you. He will be your substitute. He will stand in for you on this cross. He will know what hell is really like; so that you will never have to know. Though you deserved punishment, I will punish my dear Son instead. You are

spared. The price is paid. You are free.”

The relief and gratitude that you feel at the hearing of this news is nothing less than the stirring of faith in Jesus; the Holy Spirit at work.

Don't be in a hurry to leave the scene of the cross.

"Love so amazing, so divine/demands my soul; my life; my all."