

**FEATURE: A Physician Views the Crucifixion –
Dr. Mayo Dean Gilson**

VOICE: When several people tell conflicting stories about an event, how can we find out who is **telling the truth?**

PROF.: If the event relates to a scientific or medical subject, the opinion of a specialist can help to establish which account is true.

Today let's listen to a medical doctor's understanding of an event we remember this week – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

VOICE: Dr. Mayo Dean Gilson is a Medical Doctor and a Fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He has studied in detail medical data regarding crucifixion, a method of executing people that was practiced during the days of the Roman Empire. He has used his knowledge to evaluate the Bible's description of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The following discussion is based on Dr. Gilson's article entitled “A Physician Views the Crucifixion.”

PROF.: He begins by speaking of Luke, the author of one of the biographies of Christ that is included in the New Testament part of the Bible. In his words, “As a physician, I have felt a certain kinship with Dr. Luke, who so ably reported on the last days of Jesus' earthly life. I have also studied how a person's body would react during crucifixion – to see whether or not medical knowledge of that subject corresponds with what the author of the Gospel of Luke claimed that he saw.”

VOICE: What does Luke report?

PROF.: On the last night of his life, Jesus had an extreme spiritual struggle. Dr. Gilson especially noticed Luke's words in chapter 22, quote: “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Luke 22:44).

VOICE: I've never seen a person sweat blood or anything that looked like it. Is that statement credible?

PROF.: Yes. Dr. Gilson discovered that this bloody sweat is known medically as *hematidrosis* [hee-ma-tee-DROH-sis]. This phenomenon has been documented on rare occasions among persons undergoing extreme psychological or physiological stress.

VOICE: Jesus certainly had extreme stress. His enemies had persuaded the officials to put him to death. He had been beaten until blood flowed from the whiplashes in his back. And his friends were afraid they would also be killed, so they abandoned him.

PROF.: When a person has that level of physical and psychological stress, tiny capillaries under the skin *expand* until they *rupture* and discharge blood into the sweat glands. This causes a bloody secretion – blood mixed with sweat – to exude through the pores of the skin. The loss of this bloody, sweaty mixture would create profound dehydration and early stages of shock.

VOICE: We understand from the Bible that Jesus was God. He knew all things. Did his knowledge of the future cause him extra stress?

PROF.: Very likely. He already knew the terrible suffering he would experience the next day. He prayed in agony that if God the Father could find *any other way* to achieve the same thing, he would prefer that. He knew crucifixion would be an extremely bitter cup, and he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” (22:42a).

Finally, he was convinced that there was no other way to rescue the human race from being punished for its evil and its disobedience to God. So he told God the Father, quote, “Not my will, but Yours, be done.” (22:42b).

VOICE: God the Father and His Son Jesus both knew the cross was indispensable. So God sent extra strength to withstand the trauma to which there was no alternative.

PROF.: Correct. After Jesus' battle with his will, his enemies arrested and interrogated him the rest of the night. Jesus was exhausted from lack of sleep, from the dehydration of having perspired the mixture of blood and water, and from hostile interrogation.

The Roman governor heard the evidence and issued the verdict, “I find no fault in this man.” (23:4).

VOICE: (SURPRISED) Then why was Jesus put to death?

PROF.: Because Jesus' enemies had worked up the mob to such feverish emotion that they didn't really want justice. They wanted to see blood flow.

The judge thought he could satisfy that blood-thirstiness without a crucifixion. So he arranged a brutal whipping. Such an atrocity stripped the skin into long, ribbon-like segments, causing profuse arterial bleeding. Certainly that ought to satisfy the crowd's demand for blood. But it didn't.

So Roman soldiers drove nails through his hands and his feet, nailing him to a cross and leaving him there to die. Derived from the Latin word for “cross,” they call this “crucifixion.”

VOICE: Having nails penetrate the hands and feet would certainly cause a lot of bleeding. What other ways did crucifixion cause a person to die?

- PROF.: It also produced asphyxiation and exhaustion.
The Romans placed people on the cross in a position that made it impossible to inhale and exhale normally. In order to breathe and to relieve the pain in the arms as the body sagged downward, a person would have to use his arm muscles to lift his body's weight.
The nail through his feet would hinder his body from being lifted far, even when the person had his full strength. It also depleted his strength, so that each time he lifted his body's weight, **he lifted it less** – so he inhaled less air each time. Each effort to lift the body and breathe made the next attempt weaker. Before long he has no more strength to breathe.
- VOICE: I've heard that crucifixion was the most cruel means of execution ever devised. Is that true?
- PROF.: Probably. When people talk about extreme pain, they sometimes say it's "excruciating." That word is derived from "crucifixion."
- VOICE: Many paintings of the crucifixion show the nails through the *palms of Jesus' hands*. But from the anatomy I've studied, I don't see how a nail that was placed there could hold the body's weight. Wouldn't it tear through the flesh and not hold the body to the cross?
- PROF.: Yes. The palm doesn't have strong bones in the right places to support the body's weight when a nail is driven there. However, archaeologists have found skeletons of crucifixion victims, and the nail has been through the *wrist*. There is an opening in a bone there, which provides secure attachment to a cross.
- VOICE: Then where did artists get the idea of showing nails in the palms?
- PROF.: Most artists have read the Gospels in translation, rather than in their original language. Many translations use a word that means only the palm and fingers of the hand.
However, the word used in the original writings of this part of the Bible is more inclusive. The Greek word sometimes translated "hand" includes the wrist and forearm. The original writings are in perfect agreement with modern anatomical and archaeological knowledge.
- VOICE: Now that I've learned more about crucifixion, I can understand why Jesus begged for any possible *alternative*. Those words, "Father, if you are willing to take this cup from me," make more sense now.
- PROF.: There was no other way to achieve what Christ's death could achieve.
- VOICE: I'm not sure I fully understand what his crucifixion achieved.
- PROF.: Heaven is a perfect place. Only *perfect people* are allowed there.
- VOICE: That certainly eliminates me. In fact, would *anyone* qualify?

PROF.: Only one person, the one who **created** heaven. But he didn't want to keep it for himself alone.

Yet he knew if he let imperfect people into heaven, that would ruin the place – just as people have messed up the earth.

Sin and selfishness and all kinds of evil had become an *epidemic*. *Every* person deserved punishment. God tells us in the Bible, quote, “The wages of sin is death.” End quote. (Romans 6:23a). Elsewhere it clarifies that the punishment would be in a place of eternal suffering.

VOICE: I'm beginning to understand. An extreme emergency required extreme action.

PROF.: Yes. An *infinite* solution was required – a remedy big enough to purify *all people -- of all time*. Every sin and transgression and deviation from perfection had to be removed.

VOICE: It was a job only God Himself could accomplish.

PROF.: Exactly! The evil deeds *of all people* had to be concentrated onto one person. And the sins *of all time* had to be compressed into those few hours on the cross.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, quote, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows: ...He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities: the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and with his wounds we are healed. ...*the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” [parts of Isa. 53:4-6).

VOICE: So that's what made the cross necessary.

PROF.: Yes, and that's why we should be so grateful to Jesus Christ for allowing himself to be crucified for us.

VOICE: Thanks for sharing the insights of Dr. Gilson. I hadn't realized how much suffering was involved in the crucifixion process.

PROF.: As we've discussed these details, I've developed a deeper understanding of how serious our disobedience to God was. And I appreciate even more how deeply Jesus loved us, to take the punishment we deserved.

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