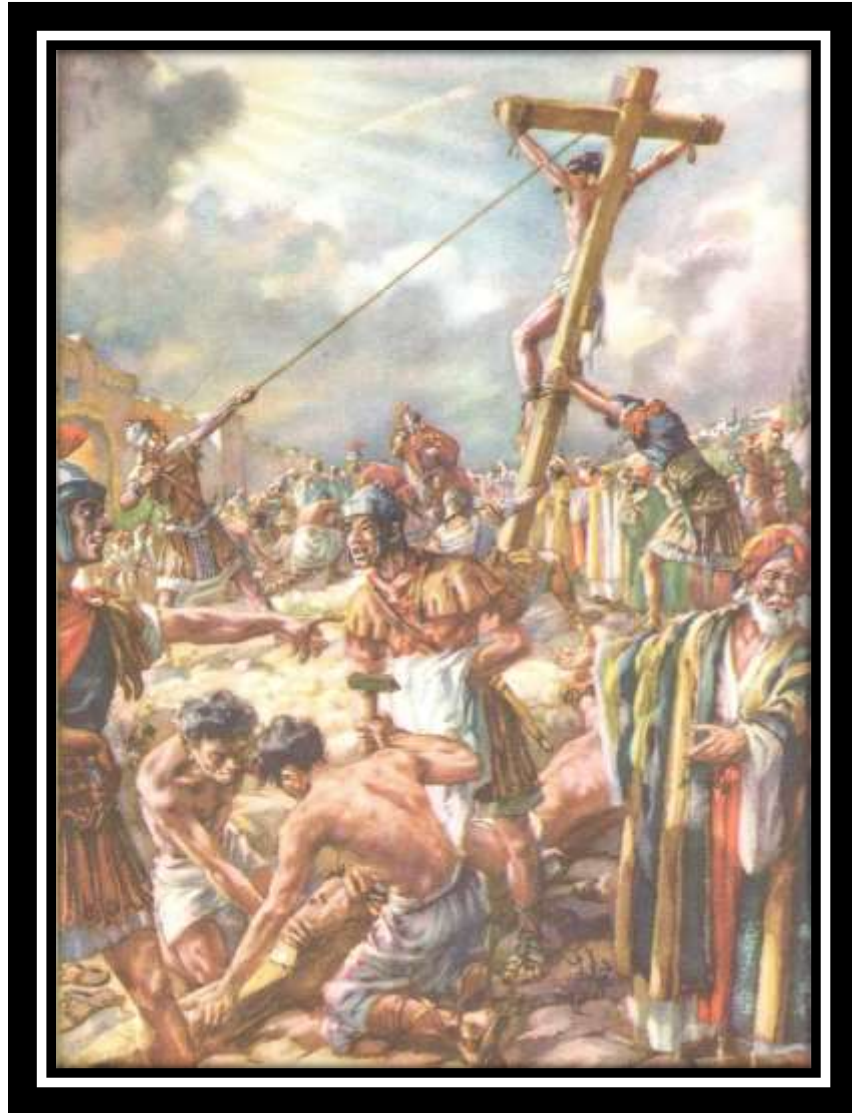


# FAITH IN WHAT—WEEK 3

## CRUCIFIXION



F. Michael Slay

*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## *Faith in What, Week 3 — Crucifixion*

Rome was an orderly, high technology empire that used crucifixion to maintain order. That was not all bad. It did maintain order, which, for example, allowed Mary and Joseph to travel safely.

And it killed Jesus in a way that left no doubt that he was dead.

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1 Matthew 16:24 (NKJV)

*Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*

Anyone living under Roman rule knew exactly what Jesus meant by, “*take up his cross.*” He meant, “suffer martyrdom.” Crucifixion was a familiar practice in the Roman world. They wanted it to be familiar.

The Roman Empire wasn’t just a conquered empire; it was a built empire. That’s why we have clichés like, “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” and, “All roads lead to Rome.” Crucifixion was their way of making that built empire run smoothly. To borrow a different Italian cliché, “It made the trains run on time.”

Crucifixion was designed to intimidate. They wanted the roads to be safe, so they would often crucify robbers they caught right where they committed their crime—beside the road. Back then robbers weren’t petty criminals, they were thugs.

*Then Jesus answered and said: “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.”* — Luke 10:30 (NKJV)

Crucifixion was effective at making the roads safe. You can’t unsee the image of someone being crucified on the side of the road. The Romans would even leave the stipes (the vertical part of a cross) there permanently to remind potential thieves, “you could be here.”

Thus, crucifixion played a role in Christianity that we don’t often talk about. Mary and Joseph needed safe roads to get to Bethlehem. In fact, without crucifixion to make the roads safe, Caesar Augustus would have been nuts to call for a census that required everyone to travel to their hometown.

The robbers feasting on easy pickings would’ve been like grizzly bears at a salmon run.

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It’d be creepy to say something like, “Thank God for crucifixion,” but many things seem to have been perfectly orchestrated in how the gospel story played out.

*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.* — Galatians 4:4–5

Part of the *fullness of time* is the structure of the Roman Empire, particularly the Roman practice of crucifixion.

Caesar Augustus needed crucifixion to make the roads safe so that he could call for a census. We need crucifixion so that Jesus could be sacrificed for our sins.

In *the fullness of time*, everything came together in perfect harmony.

2 Luke 23:4–7 (ESV)

*Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no guilt in this man.” But they were urgent, saying, “He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.”*

*When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.*

Notice how Pilate cleverly finds a way to kick this rabble out of his office. He's a high-level administrator and he's annoyed by having to deal with this. He says, “*I find no guilt in this man,*” and they reply with the charge, “*He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place.*”

Oh no! Teaching and stirring! What poppycock.

But Pilate sees an out. They've just told him who he can delegate this to—Herod. Be gone. Go pester him.

The point is that Rome doesn't take crucifixion lightly. They don't just crucify anyone at the drop of a hat. Thus, their subjects don't see the Roman Empire as being all about crucifixion. They see it as a marvelous civilization, full of modern wonders—roads, aqueducts, baths, sanitation, law and order.

Pilate's actions show that he's a professional. He's taking this seriously—as he should. You don't get yourself publicly tortured to death without doing something that must be deterred at all cost. That means anything that assaults the Roman system, thus ruining things for everyone.

Interestingly, there's one word in Greek (*lase-tase*) for the two kinds of criminals we see crucified in the Bible: robbers and insurrectionists. Their crimes are the worst because they assault the functioning of the Roman system itself. The thief on the cross is a *lase-tase*, and so is Barabbas.

Later, the chief priests return from talking to Herod and try to make the case that Jesus's claim to be a king makes him a *lase-tase* too. Their case is weak. Any large empire contains lesser kings (e.g., Herod). They need to show that Jesus is uncompliant, which they don't do. Instead, they stir up the crowds to the point that Pilate either has to cave in to their demands or risk a riot (and unwanted attention from Rome). Pilate caves, but is furious at being manipulated, so he ceremoniously washes his hands and hits back.

*Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but rather, ‘This man said, I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.” — John 19:19–22 (ESV)*

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The priests knew that Pilate's had to keep the peace or risk Rome's wrath. The Roman empire was orderly but was all subservient to one guy—Caesar. That's okay as long as Caesar isn't an anti-Christian nut.

Unfortunately for them, the first Christians suffered under some of the nuttiest dictators in history.

3 Luke 22:14–20 (ESV)

*And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*

Something happens in this passage that’s an important clue to what happens later. Jesus drank little if anything at the last supper.

The word “for” that’s used twice in this passage, is “gar” in Greek. It’s a connector of explanation.

Why has Jesus *earnestly desired to eat this Passover with them*? Because *He will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God*. Why does He ask the disciples to divide up his cup of wine? Because *from now on He will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes*.

This ends up affecting how Jesus dies and why He dies quicker than the two thieves he is crucified with. Jesus’s refusal to drink reduced His fluid levels.

Then Jesus does something that further dehydrates him. He pulls an all-nighter.

*And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.”* — Luke 22:41–46 (ESV)

Notably, Jesus even loses blood in this. He isn’t severely dehydrated yet, but he’s getting there.

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Crucifixion normally took a couple of days to kill you. That’s what the Romans wanted. Remember, the purpose of crucifixion wasn’t to get rid of someone; it was to deter others from doing what you did. They wanted you writhing and screaming in pain for a long time.

But Jesus didn’t make it that long. His unique path to the cross weakened him in a way that made him specifically vulnerable to crucifixion. He wasn’t sick to start out with and never got ill in any usual sense of the word.

He just got dehydrated.

4 Matthew 27:26, 28–31 (ESV)

*Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. ... And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.*

Scourging was a normal crucifixion practice, but the *scarlet robe* wasn't. When they stripped Jesus to put on the robe, they ripped off all the blood clots on his back. That made him bleed more. The crown of thorns cost him some blood too. Then *they stripped him of the robe*, ripping off the blood clots again.

Jesus is now incredibly weak—weaker than they expected Him to be. That's a problem, not for Jesus, but for the centurion in charge of crucifying Him.

The centurion's job is to kill people by crucifixion. They can have all the sadistic "fun" they want with the condemned, but the point of the whole thing is for other people to see them suffer crucifixion. Nailing a corpse up just won't do. He had darn well better deliver the condemned to the cross alive or he's toast.

The centurion needs to think fast. Jesus isn't going to make it to the cross at all if He is to carry his own patibulum (the horizontal part of the cross) up the hill to Golgotha. Then the centurion spots a solution.

*And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. — Luke 23:26 (ESV)*

Jesus barely makes it to the cross alive, and then doesn't live long. Frederick T. Zugibe, in his landmark work "*The Crucifixion of Jesus: A Forensic Inquiry*" describes (on page 131) how dehydration plays a key role in crucifixion. People get super thirsty on the cross, partly because of the scourging. That thirst might even be most torturous part of the whole thing. Jesus says He's thirsty just before He dies.

*After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." — John 19:28 (ESV)*

Zugibe concludes that Jesus died of hypovolemic shock; the blood loss and dehydration killed Him. Later, the Roman soldiers notice that He's already dead, so they don't break His legs. That's important; because it fulfills Psalm 34:20.

*He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. (ESV)*

Even the soldiers who put the scarlet robe on Jesus helped fulfill prophecy. Jesus had it all planned out.

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Using science, we can see how the whole sequence of events fits together perfectly.

It's thrilling that modern forensic pathology can add to our understanding of 2000 year old scriptures.

5 John 19:31–33 (ESV)

*Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.*

What did they break their legs with? A bulldozer? Leg bones are big; they don't break easy.

There's some confusion over why breaking their legs would quickly kill someone who's hanging on a cross. Pierre Barbet in his 1953 book "A Doctor at Calvary" theorized that people on a cross need their legs to raise themselves up to breathe.

In "The Crucifixion of Jesus," Zugibe used a series of detailed tests to disprove Barbet's theory. Zugibe's result is intuitive to anyone who has played on jungle gyms and monkey bars. It's impossible to find a position hanging by your arms that interferes with breathing.

But legs have very large blood vessels in them. Breaking leg bones with something like a club (or a bulldozer) invariably tears open many veins and arteries. The blood drains out quickly.

Finishing off the two thieves by breaking their legs was merciful. Dehydration is agonizing. Also, the wounds from the nails will be getting infected soon. The road up to Golgotha was covered in every kind of dirt imaginable. The nails drove that filth through their skin and into their bloodstream.

As painful as getting scourged and then nailed to a cross was, the second day held even greater terrors.

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This leads to an essential point—crucifixion produces catastrophic injuries. Even if someone is taken down from the cross and rehydrated, they're not going to recover. This refutes a common theory for how Jesus might not have actually risen from the dead—the swoon theory.

According to the swoon theory, Jesus didn't die on the cross; then He revived in the cool of the tomb. That's implausible because Jesus wasn't merely alive; He was walking around normally. (Note: I still need to prove that He was walking around normally. That's coming.)

The eyewitnesses—the ones who saw Him walking around normally—were absolutely convinced that Jesus is the Lord of the universe. No amount of torture could get them to recant. Then they went out and moved mountains.

*"It is impossible that a being who had been stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life: an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry."* — D. F. Strauss

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Is crucifixion still practiced anywhere?
2. What do you know about the Caesars?
3. What do you think about when taking communion?
4. Has science helped you understand any other Bible passages?
5. Ever found a position (on a jungle gym or elsewhere) that interfered with your breathing?

*Items for prayer:*