

Portraits of Easter

PORTRAIT THREE

THE PLACES

The Upper Room

The place where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper

For the disciples, Maundy Thursday was indeed a night of deep reflection, remorse, fear, and confusion. It all began in the upper room of a certain house in southwest Jerusalem. The exact location is not known. The Bible gives very little information regarding the building. Although today there is an upper room that tourists can visit, it is certainly not the same room used by Jesus since this one was built in the 12th century. The current structure is in an area called Mt. Zion, just a short distance from the palace of Annas and Caiaphas. The room, called the *Cenacle*, is a large open hall with the ceiling supported by three large pillars. Interestingly, the place called the upper room today lies directly above the tomb of David. It is also important to note that the Greek word for upper room, *katalyma*, is used only one other time in the Bible, that of the Bethlehem inn that had no vacancy.

Discuss: Why are the exact locations of Jesus' passion history not important to our faith?

The Garden of Gethsemane

The place of Jesus' arrest

The word *Gethsemane* is an Aramaic word derived from the Hebrew *Gat Shemen*, or a place for pressing oils. Olives and the oil extracted from them are very prevalent in this area of Palestine.



Church of All Nations

Gethsemane may have been home to a sizeable orchard of olive trees and several heavy stone olive presses. As important as

this place is to Christians, the word *Gethsemane* is surprisingly only mentioned by name twice in Scripture. Yet it holds a dear presence in the story of our Lord's passion.

Gethsemane is located just outside the northeast wall of Jerusalem, just beyond the temple. The road that passes beside Gethsemane takes travelers either to Jericho or Bethany. Gethsemane lies at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Today the Church of All Nations, built in the 1920s (also called the Basilica of the Agony), is located on this likely site of Gethsemane. In front of the altar is a large rock fragment on which Jesus supposedly prayed on that Thursday night. Next to the church is a walled off garden where eight olive trees still stand that are said to be nearly 1,000 years old. Tour guides claim they may be shoots of trees that were present at the time of Christ.

Discuss: What other important events happened on the Mount of Olives?

Calvary and the Tomb

The place of Jesus' death and burial

Certainly one of the most important places mentioned in Scripture is the place where the Lord was crucified. Many favorite hymns mention the place of the cross. Scripture uses the term *Golgotha* which is derived from the Aramaic *gulgulta* meaning "the place of the skull." In Latin it is called *calvaria*, or *Calvary*. The Bible does not tell us why it is called the place of the skull. Some feel that the hill itself or a nearby rock formation may have resembled a skull. More likely, however, it was simply that it was the place of death. Again the Bible gives very few clues as to its location. John 19:41,42 tells us that the tomb in which the Savior was buried was in close vicinity to the cross. Hebrews 13:12 says that it was outside the city gate, and Matthew 27:39 hints that it was near a well-traveled road. It is true that the Jews

would not allow crucifixions or burials within the city walls. (Today the most likely site is within the walls, but the wall location has been moved and expanded since the time of Christ.) We also know that the Romans carried out their crucifixions in sight of many people, so a main thoroughfare would serve as an ideal location.



Church of the Holy Sepulcher

The most reliable site was determined by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, who searched out the site in A.D. 326. She was told that Calvary and the grave were beneath a pagan temple that had been built on the site near the northwest corner of Jerusalem. She had the temple destroyed and built a church on the

location. That church no longer exists; however, in its place the huge Church of the Holy Sepulcher was built. This church was placed over both the possible site of Jesus' crucifixion and his tomb.

According to tradition, Jesus' final walk along what is now called the Via Dolorosa (way of the cross) could have begun at the Antonia Fortress (northeast corner of the city) and proceeded along city streets and out the Damascus (Fish) Gate to the place of Calvary, a bit less than half a mile or four or five city blocks. Still a long walk to carry a 100-pound beam. (That path may be disputed depending on where Pilate met with Jesus.)

Discuss: What do you think went through Jesus' mother's mind on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of that week?

THE PIECES

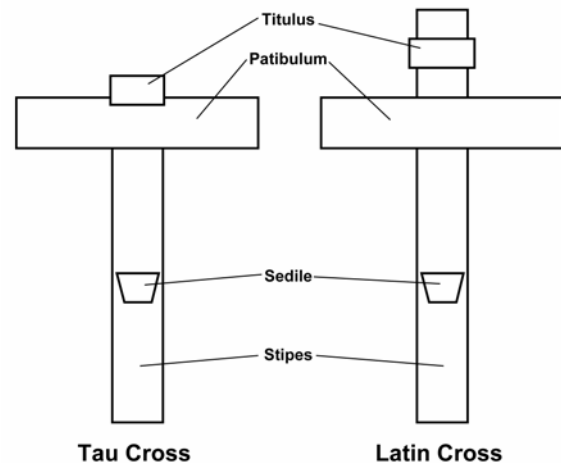
The Cross

A Roman tool of humiliation, torture, and death

This most horrid form of death was not the invention of the Romans. It was practiced by the Carthaginians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians. Crucifixion was reserved for non-Roman slaves, rebels, and criminals. Its purpose was not just to kill the criminal but to mutilate and display the dishonored body to the masses. It served to deter criminals from

such a horrible sentence. Even before the time of Christ, it was said that people who were suffering were "bearing their own cross." This disgraceful torture was designed to produce a slow death with great suffering.

There are three possible shapes of the cross on which Jesus was nailed. The Latin or *crux immissa* is the traditional cross shape that we see in most depictions of the crucifixion. This allowed sufficient room for the crimes to be shown. A display sign (the *titulus*) detailed each crime that had been committed. The gospel writers each give their rendition of the sign. Matthew 27:37 records the charge as "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Mark 15:26 writes, "The King of the Jews." Luke 23:38 records, "This is the King of the Jews." John 19:19,20 gives more detail. He writes that Pilate gave the order, and the sign read, "Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews." John goes on to say that the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek because of the many passersby. He also claims that the Jews protested the wording. They wanted it to say



that Jesus *claimed* to be the King of the Jews. Pilate refused to make the change.

Another possible form of cross is simply a tree with two equal cross sets of branches. Some believe this to be the type Jesus was crucified upon because of the many references to him dying on a tree.

The third, and perhaps most logical type of cross, was the *Tau* or *crux commissa*. Here the upright post (*stipes*) was permanently fixed in the ground, and the accused carried the crossbeam (*patibulum*). The beam dropped until it hit a notch in the upright post, making it very sturdy. Here there was also

sufficient room to post the titulus. This cross was most common among Roman crucifixions. The patibulum weighed about 110 pounds. This was likely the section that Jesus attempted to carry to Calvary. Its chafing was unbearable. Fortunately Simon of Cyrene was put into service to assist the Savior. The victim's arms were often tied to this beam while carrying it to the place of crucifixion. The criminal was then nailed, tied, or both to the crossbar. If the 5-7 inch nails were used, they were likely driven into the wrists so as not to fracture bones or do injury to major arteries. Nails were then driven into the arches and heels and then into the stipes.

A small block seat (*sedile*) was attached halfway down the stipes. This would allow the criminal to rest for brief moments. Every movement resulted in more pain and agony. The length of survival from crucifixion ranged from a few hours to several days. If a criminal was still alive after a few days or needed to be removed before a high festival, the legs were broken, which caused immediate suffocation since the prisoner could no longer push himself upward. Such was the case with the criminals crucified beside Jesus. Death was usually caused by heart failure that resulted from a severe drop in blood pressure while doubling the pulse rate.

As heinous as this form of death was, the almighty God used it for his purposes and caused it to become the platform on which he saved all people.

Discuss: Why does Scripture frequently refer to bearing one's "cross"?

The Grave

The place of burial

John gives a detailed account of what took place after the death of Jesus. Since the Sabbath and the high festival of the Passover were fast approaching, the Jews asked Pilate to hurry the death of those on the crosses. This was accomplished by crushing the criminals' legs with a large mallet to keep them from pushing themselves upward and thus getting needed oxygen into their lungs. Pilate granted the request.

After breaking the legs of the two malefactors, the soldiers came to the Savior

who appeared to be already dead. To assure them of such, they pierced Jesus' side and noticed a flow of blood and water, signifying death. This was no little stab into Christ's side. (See John 20:27.) Both actions of the soldiers fulfilled prophecies concerning Jesus' death. (See Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10.)

Burial customs at the time of Jesus were the same as had been practiced for centuries. According to the law given in Deuteronomy 21:22,23, even criminals were to be removed from the "tree" and buried by 6:00 P.M. The Romans frequently left the dead to hang on their crosses for days or until the scavenging birds had picked the bodies clean. But the Jews usually cared for their own people and saw to it that the letter of the law was upheld. For that reason, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus and a member of the Sanhedrin, went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Likely his status as a ranking Jew gave him access to Pilate. However, he was risking his seat and reputation if it were discovered that he was a follower of the one the Sanhedrin wanted dead. Normally a family member of the dead would take care of burial plans; however, since Jesus' family was from Galilee and very poor, they were ill prepared to do so.

When Joseph approached Pilate for the body, Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead. Jesus was nailed to the cross about 9:00 A.M. and the time was now 3:00 P.M. Most men would remain alive much longer. Pilate willingly agreed to the plan.

It was customary for Jews to be buried in family sepulchers. We know, for instance, that in one cave at Machpelah (south of Bethlehem) Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob were buried. Although Jesus' father, Joseph, was likely already dead and buried, Jesus was left as an orphan without a place for burial. Joseph of Aramathea was the owner of a tomb. (The location is not certain; however, it must have been very near the crucifixion site.) We are told it was a new tomb, never before used. Tombs were often cut from rock like a cave. Usually they had two rooms. The first was an entryway where the body could be prepared for burial, and the second was the burial room where the body was often laid on a stone shelf cut into a wall. After a body laid on the shelf for about a year and had

sufficiently decomposed, the bones were placed in a stone box, or *ossuary* (“bone box”). Thus a new tomb had a shelf never before used.

John tells us that Nicodemus (a fellow member of the Sanhedrin) assisted in the preparation. The burial procedure included



Christ's Death Slab
Church of the Holy Sepulcher

body preparation. This was to be done quickly because the climate caused rapid decomposition of the body. The body was wrapped in a

linen cloth (which we read in Mark 15:46 was bought for this time and purpose) with spices such as myrrh and aloes. Often a separate linen napkin was used to wrap the head. (See John 20:6,7.) The task of preparing the body for burial was usually left to women; however, in Jesus' case the application of about 75 pounds of spices and wrapping was done hastily by Joseph since the body needed to be in the tomb by 6:00 P.M. Often great care was taken. Hair and nails were cut, and the body was gently wiped with a mixture of spices. However, this burial was done hastily. Luke 23:55 records that while Jesus' body was being prepared, several women watched from a distance. He writes that they witnessed the tomb and saw how his body was placed in it. These women spent Saturday, the Sabbath, during which further preparation was not allowed, readying more spices to complete the burial on Sunday.

There are two sites today that claim to be the place of Jesus' tomb. The more likely of the two is within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is located just inside the walls of Old Jerusalem. The second and less likely site called the Garden Tomb was discovered in the 1800s by British general Charles Gordon. Here there is no church, just a simple sepulcher with a stone rolled beside the entrance.

Discuss: What would have been your thoughts if you were one of Jesus' followers and you just heard the news that Jesus was dead and now buried?

LUTHER'S INSIGHTS

"If a day of sorrow or sickness weighs you down, think, how trifling that is compared with the thorns and nails of Christ. If you must do or leave undone what is distasteful to you: think, how Christ was led hither and thither, bound and a captive. Does pride attack you: behold, how your Lord was mocked and disgraced with murderers. Do unchastity and lust thrust themselves against you: think, how bitter it was for Christ to have his tender flesh torn, pierced and beaten again and again. Do hatred and envy war against you, or do you seek vengeance: remember how Christ with many tears and cries prayed for you and all his enemies, who indeed had more reason to seek revenge. If trouble or whatever adversity of body or soul afflict you, strengthen your heart and say: Ah, why then should I not also suffer a little since my Lord sweat blood in the garden because of anxiety and grief? That would be a lazy, disgraceful servant who would wish to lie in his bed while his lord was compelled to battle with the pangs of death." [From his Good Friday Sermon, 1519]

THE STORY BEHIND...

"O SACRED HEAD, NOW WOUNDED"

by Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153)

Translated from Latin to German by Paul Gerhardt and into English by John Alexander

Bernard of Clairvaux lived a glamorous life in a French castle, born the son of a knight. Yet when he turned 25, he decided to give it all up and formed his own monastery at Clairvaux, France, where he would stay for the remainder of his life. Martin Luther once called him "the most pious monk that ever lived."

Although Bernard was a very good preacher, today he is best known for his hymns, especially "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded." This hymn was taken from a long poem that focused on the seven parts of Jesus that were wounded: his head, breast, hands, feet, side, knees, and heart. Certainly he succeeded in painting a picture of suffering and devotion in this thoughtful Lenten hymn.

Bernard of Clairvaux is also credited with other hymns including "O Jesus, King Most Wonderful."