

The Testimony of the Spear

“So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, ‘Not a bone of Him shall be broken.’ And again another Scripture says, ‘They shall look on Him whom they pierced’” (John 19:32–37).

Normally, the Romans left the crucified body of a criminal on his cross to serve as a public warning of the consequences of lawlessness. Tiberius, the emperor in power when Jesus was crucified, allowed the relatives of crucified victims to bury their bodies.¹

The Jews looked to the Old Testament for guidance on what to do with those who had been executed:

If a man . . . is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22, 23).

After stating that Jesus had breathed His last, John² recorded that the Jews (probably some members of the Sanhedrin who were concerned about keeping the law in regard to those who had been executed) went to Pilate and asked that the victims be killed and taken down from the crosses. The Jews were especially anxious to observe the law about removing dead bodies before the Passover. It was Friday, the “preparation day,” and the Sabbath was rapidly approaching. Detailed preparation had to be made, for no work could be done on the Sabbath. Food had to be prepared, and other arrangements had to be made

so that this holy day could be faithfully kept. This particular Sabbath was even more sacred. John called it a “high day,” for it was the Sabbath of the Passover week. The Jews wanted to be ceremonially clean for this special Sabbath. They wanted their observance of the Passover to be acceptable before the Lord, so their city and their land had to be free from any curse of God. They appealed to Pilate to have the criminals killed and taken down from their crosses.

Pilate acquiesced, directing his execution crew to kill the criminals and remove the bodies. In fulfillment of his order, the soldiers in charge of the crucifixions began the procedure of breaking the legs of each dying man.

For some reason, the soldiers approached Jesus last. Perhaps they simply started on the left and the right and worked toward the middle. Possibly, still in awe over all that had happened, they were waiting with a crude reverence to carry out the injunction concerning Jesus.

They used some kind of mallet to break the legs of the two thieves. This method was known as *crurifragium*, a term that meant “to crush with a heavy instrument.” It was sometimes used to add to the torture of crucifixion, but on this occasion it was used to hasten death. Without the support of his legs, a victim was unable to lift himself to breathe properly. The thieves surely died in a matter of minutes in spasms of excruciating pain.

When the soldiers reached Jesus, they found that He was already dead. One of them thrust a spear into His side. We are not given details. John simply wrote, “But coming to Jesus, when

¹R. C. H. Lenski, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 1312.

²Only John mentioned that the Jews made this request and that a soldier pierced Jesus’ side with a spear. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not even allude to this episode.

they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear" (John 19:33, 34a).

Following the plunging of the spear into Jesus' side, John said, "Immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:34b). Then the author, just this once, broke the flow of his narrative to affirm that he was an eyewitness to what had occurred. He said, "And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe" (John 19:35). His verb choice indicates that his account was intended to speak out indefinitely, from age to age.

John saw the soldiers break the legs of the thieves. He heard the thieves groan in agony, as they gasped for air and breathed their last. He saw one thief lower his head into the merciful sleep of death as his spirit sped away to be with Jesus in Paradise. He saw the other thief become limp in death as his spirit left this world to experience a worse horror in eternity. Then he watched blood and water flow from Jesus' side.

The appearance of the "blood and water" has brought much discussion by those who have carefully studied Jesus' death. Physicians try to explain it but cannot agree on what happened. Two truths should be kept in mind. First, John reported this incident to affirm that Jesus was dead. Second, none of us can fully comprehend what happened as the perfect Man, the Son of God in the flesh, gave Himself physically and spiritually for the sins of the world.

One fact is certain: John saw this spear as giving a special testimony concerning Jesus' death. Already, those at the cross had witnessed the darkness over the land, the earthquake, the rending of the veil of the temple, the opening of the tombs, and the declaration by the centurion and those with him that Jesus was the Son of God. As the spear added its silent testimony to the resounding evidence, what did it say?

The spear sounded an affirmation: Jesus was dead. The thrust was made in order to verify Jesus' death. John said, "But coming to Jesus, . . . they saw that He was *already dead*" (John 19:33a; emphasis mine). With these words, he affirmed beyond question that Jesus was dead before He was taken down from the cross.

This thrust of the spear removed any suspicion that Jesus was merely unconscious, that life could still remain in His body. Jesus rose

from the tomb on Sunday morning; but before there could be a burial or a resurrection, there had to be a death. The spear said that the death had definitely occurred.

The spear echoed a confirmation: Jesus was divine. After relating the thrusting of the spear into Jesus' side, John said, "For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture . . ." (John 19:36a). God used the actions of the Roman soldiers to fulfill prophecies and, therefore, to confirm that Jesus was the One whom God had sent.

In reporting that no bone in Jesus' body was broken, John recalled the Old Testament instruction concerning the Paschal lamb. He quoted from Exodus 12:46, saying, "Not a bone of him [the lamb] shall be broken" (John 19:36b). Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, offered Himself for our sins—and His offering followed Moses' instructions.

As he watched, John remembered another Scripture: "They will look on Me whom they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10b). This picture given by Zechariah the prophet was also fulfilled in Jesus' death. The piercing of Jesus' side was part of the plan that God had announced many years before. John also referred to this prophecy in Revelation 1:7.

The passion narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John remind us that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures. The Old Testament prepared the world for the coming of the Messiah, and the New Testament revealed that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled the prophecies that had been made.

What, then, did the spear say? It said that Jesus was dead. He came to die for our sins, and the testimony of this event is that He did just that! Further, the spear declared that Jesus was different from the other two men who died that day. He was Deity. He was the Son of God and fulfilled every prophecy that was made concerning Him in the Old Testament.

The spear has spoken. Let us bend low and listen to what it has said.

Eddie Cloer



The Bible makes three great declarations: The first is the announcement of the Old Testament that the Messiah was coming, the second is the declaration of the Gospels that the Messiah did come, and the third is the promise of the Epistles that the Messiah is coming back.