

## Then They Brought Jesus to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull

**Matthew 27:31-34; Mark 15:20-23;**

**Luke 23:26-31; John 19:16b-17**

About 8:00 am Friday morning, the fifteenth of Nisan

**DIG:** What are the *patibulum*, the *stipes* and the *titulus*? Why was Simon needed to carry Messiah's crossbeam? How did that affect him? Why did Jesus tell the women of Yerushalayim to **weep**? What did Yeshua mean when He said: **For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry** (Luke 23:31)? What was Golgotha, where was Golgotha, and what did it mean? Why did Jesus refuse to drink the wine mixed with myrrh (gall)? What did the cross mean to the lower classes?

**REFLECT:** It is human nature, when we have an unpleasant assignment ahead of us, to try to think of a way out of it. Yeshua knew from all eternity past that this day would come, but He resolutely set out for Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). When you read about the indescribable physical and emotional pain that the Suffering Servant endured, how do you feel about that? If Jesus could turn the *titulus* (the sign above His head) around and write a personal message to you on it, what do you think it would say? If you could write a personal message to Christ, what would you say to Him?

Yeshua's sham trials are over. The verdict has been passed. The accused makes His way to the place of execution. Last-minute details take on particular importance - a passerby recruited to help carry **the cross**, women watching and weeping, and two other death-row criminals almost forgotten in the crowd, and a mocking sign - all these create a haunting scene of sacrifice. As you revisit this scene, what will you learn from **the cross of Christ?**<sup>1587</sup>

**There are 32 distinctive stages from the procession to Golgotha, to the sealing of the tomb by the Romans.**<sup>1588</sup>

After the Roman soldiers had mocked Him, they took off the purple robe and put His clothes back on Him. Then they led Him away to crucify Him (Matthew 27:31; Mark 15:20). Jesus was led through the Gennath (Garden) Gate to Golgotha. There, outside the city walls of Yerushalayim, the crucifixion took place. Just as the sin offering was driven out of the Temple and the City, so it happened with the Lord Jesus Christ. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the Camp of Isra'el. And so Yeshua also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood (Hebrews 13:11-12).

**Stage 1 - Christ carrying the cross by Himself:** So the soldiers took charge of Yeshua, making Him carry His own cross (John 19:16b-17a). It was customary for the condemned man to carry his own crossbeam (called the *patibulum*) to the waiting vertical post (called the *stipes*), if he was physically able after the flogging. Weighing from 75 to 125 pounds, it was placed across the nape of the victim's neck and balanced along the shoulders. Its splinters quickly found their way to open the wounds on Christ's shoulders. A complete Roman military guard, headed by a centurion, led the processional to the site of crucifixion.

One of the soldiers carried a sign, or *titulus*, on which the condemned man's name and crime were displayed. Later, the *titulus* was attached to the top of the cross so that any passerby would know who was being executed and why. So if sedition was the charge, then that's what the sign should read. But Pontius Pilate doesn't forget a score to be settled. In a last attempt to get the better of Caiaphas, the governor had the inscription written in charcoal: **THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH: KING OF THE JEWS**. People on the rooftops gathered near the edge to watch the mournful march, to see the faces of the condemned and to try to read the signs of their offense. The men moved slowly because Jesus could not be urged to go faster than a staggering gate. Along the sides of the road, pilgrims pressed against the walls and argued loudly for guilt or innocence as the parade meandered by. The soldiers moved the crowds back, when necessary with their spears, and the soldier who led on the horse shouted continuously for the people to make way for the soldiers of Rome.

**Stage 2 - Simon of Cyrene:** Jesus was apparently so weakened by the severe flogging that He could not carry the crossbeam from the praetorium to the site of the crucifixion. As the soldiers led Him away they seized Simon, from Cyrene, a city of Libya, the father of Alexander and Rufus, who was on his way in from the country. Libya is on the northern shore of Africa just opposite the Grecian peninsula. Jerusalem had received a Jewish settlement in the time of Ptolemy I, and the Jews formed an influential section there. At Zion, the name of Cyrene was associated with one of the synagogues (Acts 6:9), and we know that Jewish inhabitants of Cyrenaica were among the worshipers at Shavu'ot in the year of the crucifixion (Acts 2:10). If Simon had become a resident of the City, or was merely a visitor at the Passover, it is impossible to know for sure.<sup>1589</sup>

The Roman soldiers put the crossbeam on him and made him carry it behind Jesus (Mattityahu 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). The Lord had been up all night - first at His Seder and then at the garden of Gethsemane. From there, He was taken to Caiaphas, then to Annas, and then sent back to Caiaphas. Once convicted by the Sanhedrin, He was taken to Pilot, then to Herod Antipas, and back to Pilot to be condemned to the cross. By this time he probably hadn't eaten in about twelve hours. As a former carpenter, Jesus

knew how to carry lumber, but as a result of the flogging, the blood loss and the emotional stress, **He** was so weakened that **He** could not carry **the crossbeam** to **Golgotha**.<sup>1590</sup> **The centurion** must have become concerned as **Jesus** repeatedly stumbled. Should **the prisoner** die before reaching **the cross**, **he** would be held responsible. So the pilgrim bystander, the African Jew named **Simon** was recruited to carry **the crossbeam** for **Yeshua**. In **Romans 16:13** **Rufus** is mentioned because **he** was then living in **Rome** and the believers there knew **him**. So this incident led to the conversion of **Simon**, **his wife** and **his two sons** **Alexander and Rufus**, mentioned in book of **Romans**.

The horseman started forward again, as slowly as possible. **Simon** followed behind **Jesus** and knew that this bleeding **Jew** was close to the point of total exhaustion because **he** had trouble moving **his feet** even with no **crossbeam** to carry. The pathetic parade moved down the street to the south, and then turned right.

Ahead was a formidable hill, leading to the Gennath (Garden) Gate. The walk to the cross was a little more than half finished. The spectators were not so numerous on the hill because it was a residential district. Many who read the signs asked, in forlorn sorrow, "Why did you do these things?" **Jesus** did not answer; the **criminals** wailing behind **Him** did not answer.

**Stage 3 - The Lament Over Jerusalem:** A large number of people followed **Him**, including women who mourned and wailed for **Him** (Luke 23:27). Under Roman law, sympathy toward someone accused of a crime was permitted, but sympathy toward one condemned to death was forbidden. However, there was a society of charitable women. They presented gifts at circumcisions, betrothals and weddings, and gave money and tears when death visited poor families. As **Jesus** dragged **His feet** up the long hill, **He** was in such acute pain that the people who were standing by could hear **His** breathing, and among them were these charitable women. **Their** hearts were moved and, when **one of them** burst into tears, **all** began to sob. Many could no longer bear to look at **Him**.

**Jesus** stopped. **His** chest heaved with the effort to breath, and **His** gaze turned shakily from **one woman** to the next until **He** had seen **them all** and had seen **their** tears - the first shed for **His** death. It seemed for a moment that **He** would **weep** with **them**. Instead, **His** voice strained, **He** warned **the women** of the impending doom of **Yerushalayim**. **And said to them:** **Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, "Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!" Then they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry (Luke 23:28-31)?**

The centurion came running back and urged the column to continue its march. The women were staring at Jesus through wet eyes. They had heard the words, but they did not understand them. But it was as if Yeshua was saying, "If they treat Me like this who is innocent, how will they treat you who are guilty?" This will be because of the curse of the blood when the people of Jerusalem cried out: His blood is on us and on our children (Matthew 27:25)! The finality of that curse will be the destruction of Yerushalayim in 70 AD. Then, mechanically, our Lord began the effort of lifting one foot in front of the other, trying to move forward again.

Beyond the horseman up ahead, Jesus could see the Gennath (Garden) Gate. The centurion hurried ahead of his column and tacked up a notice on the outside of the gate, which explained who would be executed that day at the pleasure of Tiberius Caesar, and for what crimes. It had been a long and difficult road for the Son of God, and it was almost a consolation to know that fifty more steps would bring Him to the pinnacle of His promise. The chance to die for everyone.

A tide of people squeezed through the Garden Gate. The horseman sat astride his animal between the giant doors and ordered the people to stand aside. The pilgrims arriving for the seven-day festival of Unleavened Bread and Pesach grumbled. Most of them had come from far away - this was the crossroads of Joppa-Jerusalem road and the north-south Samaria-Jerusalem road. They did not welcome further delay, because many of them had remained on the road all night to ensure getting to the Holy City before Shabbat began. Besides, they had made this trip in joy; but now it was so painful to see Romans putting Jews to death.

**Stage 4 - The Arrival at Golgotha:** Then they brought Jesus to the place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha (Mattityahu 27:33; Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33a; John 19:17a). The initial floggings took place within the walls of Yerushalayim, but the crucifixions themselves took place outside the City, on a hill known as *Calvarius* or, as the Jews say in Aramaic, *Golgotha*, meaning *the place of the skull* or *Calvary* (Luke 23:33). This is thought to refer to the shape and appearance of the hill. It was the place of execution. A rocky hill about fifteen feet high. It was not large hill, but a low rise within a very short distance from Jerusalem's city wall. In fact, anyone standing atop those walls would be able to view Jesus' crucifixion at almost eye level and will be so close that they can hear every word He said if spoken loudly enough.<sup>1591</sup> In the little descent behind the hill was a garden, bursting now with pink and red wild flowers. And about one hundred feet northwest, was a tomb newly hollowed out by Joseph of Arimathea.

A stranger could not mistake the fact that this was a place of execution, because three **vertical** wooden **posts** stood naked against the sky. Sometimes there were more, but there were never fewer than three. These were ordinary cypress **posts**, like those carried by the condemned men, except, at the top, **they** had been planed down so that **the crossbeams** could dovetail across **them**.

**Jesus** looked at **them** wearily. As tortured as **He** was physically, the worst was yet to come . . . spiritual separation, for the one time in all eternity, from **the Father** and **the Ruach HaKodesh**. A crowd gathered, and in the front **He** saw the ceremonial hats of the Sadducees. **The soldiers** formed a perimeter line inside the roads, and, when **they** permitted a small group of people to come through onto **Golgotha**. **Messiah** tried to form **His** face into a smile because, among them **He** saw **His mother**.<sup>1592</sup>

As the procession arrived atop **Golgotha**, **the soldiers** sent **Simon** away and **he** dropped **the crossbar** onto the dirt. Once **the supervisor** gave the signal, the death squad took control. **The soldiers** moved in quickly around the prisoners and began to strip **them** of **their** clothes. **The executioner** laid **the crossbeam** behind **Jesus** and brought **Him** to the ground quickly by grasping **His** arm and pulling **Him** backward. As soon as **Christ** fell, **the crossbeam** was fitted under the back of **His** neck and, on each side, **soldiers** quickly knelt and on the inside of the elbows. **Jesus** offered no resistance and said nothing, but **He** groaned as **He** fell on the back of **His** head and the thorns pressed against **His** torn scalp.

There were normally four **Roman soldiers** assigned to kill each **criminal**. **His** flogging wounds most likely would become torn open again and contaminated with dirt. Once begun, the matter was done quickly and efficiently. One of **the four soldiers** wore an apron with pockets. **He** placed two iron nails between **his** teeth and, hammer in hand, knelt beside the right arm. With **his** right hand, the executioner probed the wrist of **Jesus** to find the little hollow spot, directly behind where the so-called lifeline ends.

With arms outstretched, but not taut, the wrists were nailed to **the crossbar** as two **soldiers** put all **their** weight on each arm to hold it down. Although scriptural references are made to nails in the hands, these are not at odds with the archeological evidence of wrist wounds, since the people of that time period normally considered the wrist to be part of the hand. Hand washing, for instance, was from the tip of the fingers to the elbow. The archeological remains of a crucified body, found in an ossuary near **Jerusalem** and dating from the time of **Christ**, indicate that the nails were tapered iron spikes approximately 5 to 7 inches long with a square shaft about 3/8<sup>th</sup> of an inch across. It has been shown that the ligaments and bones of the wrist can support the weight of a body hanging from them, but the palms cannot.

Then **the executioner** raised the hammer over the nail head and brought it down with force. Driving the nails into the wrists would avoid any bones and pass all the way through to the wood in just a few sharp swings of the hammer. But it would also crush or sever the rather large sensorimotor median nerve that would produce excruciating bolts of fiery pain down both arms. That, in turn, would produce a claw like grasp of the hands. When **the cross** was hoisted upward the victim's body weight would be suspended from those two spikes. The bones kept the thin layer of muscle from ripping, preventing the person from falling forward.

**The executioner** then jumped across **Jesus'** outstretched arms to the other wrist . . .

As soon as **the soldier** was satisfied that **the Lord** could not, in struggling, pull **Himself** loose and perhaps fall forward off **the cross** itself, **he** brought both of **his** arms up in rapid succession. This was the signal to lift the **crossbeam**.

Two **soldiers** grabbed each side of **the crossbeam** and lifted. As **they** pulled up, **they** dragged **Jesus** by the wrists. When **the soldiers** reached **the upright post**, **they** began to lift **the crossbeam** higher until the feet of **Messiah** were off the ground. Four **soldiers** could accomplish this with relative ease. But nevertheless, **Jesus'** body withered in pain. **They** kept pushing upwards until **the crossbeam** fit in the mortise joint of **the wooden post**. With every breath, **He** groaned. Caiaphas looked at the other Sadducees and said that this was a very poor example of a **Messiah**. In his time, the high priest said, he had seen much better.

When **the crossbeam** was set firmly, **the executioner** reached up and set the sign that listed the name of the prisoner and the nature of his crime. Next, the feet were nailed to the cross. Two **soldiers** hurried to help, and each took hold of a leg at the calf. This was probably the most difficult part of the work. If the feet were pulled downward, and nailed too close to the foot of the cross, the prisoner always died quickly. Over the years **the Romans** learned to push the feet upward on **the cross**, so that the condemned man could lean on the nails in his feet and push himself upward. To accomplish this, flexion of the knees may have been exaggerated and the bent legs were probably rotated laterally and a single seven-inch nail was driven through the Achilles' tendon of both heels at the same time. A piece of acacia or pistacia wood was placed between the nail head and the heels to make sure they were pinned firmly to the wooden cross. Although there would be considerable blood loss during the crucifixion because of the flogging and the rubbing of the open wounds on the back against the splintery wooden cross as the criminal pushed up for air and then slumped down in exhaustion, the wrists and heels did not bleed very much since no major arteries were hit, other than perhaps the deep plantar arch.<sup>1593</sup>

If **the Romans** wanted a victim to suffer for a longer period of time, they place a small seat called *the sedecula*, that jutted out halfway up **the vertical post**. This was nailed beneath the pelvis of the criminal and, as his fatigue increased, he tended to try to rest on the small seat. It prolonged the agony of the victim by preventing collapse. However, because **the Romans** usually tried as much as possible to respect the local laws of the people they had conquered, they knew they had to do their work relatively quickly. The Sabbath would begin at dawn on the same day.

**The soldiers** moved to the other **two zealots**, and went thru the same ritual with each.

**Stage 5 - The Refusal to Drink Wine Mixed with Gall:** There they tried to offer Jesus wine to drink, mixed with myrrh (gall); but after tasting it, he refused to drink it (**Mattityahu 27:34; Mark 15:23**). In an act of mercy, Roman law gave the victim given a bitter drink of **wine mixed with gall** as a mild painkiller. But **the Lord** refused it because **He** wanted to be in total control over **His** senses for what will happen next. **He** had to feel the fullness of the pain.

Because **slaves** where **crucified** more than any other group in **the Roman** empire, **slaves**, especially **slaves**, knew the horror of **the cross** in a more personal way than it was for members of the middle or upper class. As a result, to the natural mind, an alleged **Son of God** who could not save **Himself** at the time of **His** greatest need (**Mark 15:31**), and who rather required **His** followers to take up **the cross**, was also hardly attractive to the lower classes of **Roman** and **Greek** society. The lower classes knew all too well what **the cross** meant, to be paraded throughout **the City** disgraced, and then to be nailed to it. They feared it, and consequently, also wanted to get away from it at all costs.

Death on **the cross** was the penalty for **slaves** and everyone knew it. **But He made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness (Philippians 2:7)**. **The cross** symbolized extreme humiliation, shame and torture. When Paul spoke of the **crucified Christ (First Corinthians 1:23 and 2:2; Galatians 3:1)**, it would be equivalent to the death penalty by the electric chair today. How would you feel today if believers went around with little electric chairs around their necks? How about making the sign of the electric chair? Electric chairs would be on the tops of churches. We would sing the Old Rugged Electric Chair, or Old Sparky. Is this offensive to you? That's the point.

**The cross** never became a symbol of suffering for Isra'el. **Deuteronomy 21:23b** said: **Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.** So **crucifixion** was taboo as a form of capital punishment and became especially scandalous when **the Romans** imposed it on them. Therefore, a **crucified Messiah** could not be accepted either!

For the early messianic community, **becoming more like Christ in His sufferings and death on the cross** called for a revolutionary new element in the preaching of the Gospel (**Philippians 2:8**). It caused offense, but the very offense itself was the heart of the Gospel message. It was, and is, impossible to separate Christianity, or messianic Judaism, from **the cross**. The tip cannot be broken off of the spear for it to be of any use at all. Rabbi Sha'ul said in his letter to the church at Corinth: **I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (First Corinthians 2:2).**

A crowd watched from the base of the hill. Among them were **Messiah's** faithful disciple **Mary Magdalene** and **His mother, Miryam.** **John** had forewarned **her** what was going to happen to **her** firstborn **son**, but **she** chose to come anyway. **She** knew **she** had to be there. But now all **she** can do is look upon **Him** in agony.

And so it was that **Jesus of Nazareth** hung on **the** old rugged **cross**.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged **cross**, the emblem of suffering and shame; and I love that old **cross** where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners, was slain.

So I'll cherish that old rugged **cross**, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to **the** old rugged **cross** and exchange it some day for a crown.

George Bennard, 1913 (**Second Corinthians 1:22-25**)