

Mementos of Christ's Passion

A SOLDIER'S SPEAR

Over the centuries, the spear that pierced the side of Jesus Christ became shrouded in legend. It was said to wield great mystical power. It was given many names, including the Holy Lance, the Holy Spear, the Spear of Destiny, and the Spear of Longinus—named for Gaius Cassius Longinus, the Roman soldier who allegedly pierced the side of Christ and later became a Christian. According to legend, Longinus, if such a soldier truly existed, was assigned to crucifixion duty that Good Friday because his cataracts made him unfit for other forms of military service.

Today, the spear is said to reside in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; also in Armenia, Turkey, Poland, and Austria. Interestingly, the Austrian location has a connection to Adolf Hitler. While living in Vienna, Austria, Hitler grew entranced with the Sword of Destiny, often staring at the relic for hours. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*: "I felt as though I myself had held it in my hands before in an earlier century of history—that I myself had once claimed it as my talisman of power and held the destiny of the world in my hands."

Many believe that Hitler invaded Austria in 1938 to retrieve the Sword of Destiny before pursuing his dreams of global domination and a Thousand-Year Third Reich. Historically, this much is certain: After invading Austria, one of Hitler's first actions was to take the spear from the Hapsburg Palace.

These are merely some of the fables surrounding the spear that pierced Christ's side. But what are the realities? What

lessons may we learn from this memento of Christ's passion?

First, the soldier's spear reminds us that Jesus died on the cross. And yes, this is a simple, obvious lesson. After all, how many crucified victims survived crucifixion? How many detached themselves from the seven-inch iron spikes driven through their wrists and feet? And even if this were possible—and it was not—how many left the scene of a *public* execution, surrounded by battle-hardened Roman soldiers armed with swords and spears? The Romans used crucifixion because it was so painful, so lethal, so inescapable.

Yes, as true Man and true God, Jesus had the infinite power to do anything, including avoiding the cross or leaving it. But He came to die for our sins; indeed, to endure every aspect of our punishment—and to such an extent that, when offered a mild sedative of wine and myrrh to slightly diminish the pain of the cross, Jesus refused to drink it. Instead, He took all of our sin, pain, and punishment on Himself.

However, to this very day, enemies of Christ insist that He did not die on the cross; that Roman soldiers whether from plot or pity, spared His life; that Pilate had a change of heart; that Jesus was drugged to merely appear dead; that after surviving the cross, Jesus married Mary Magdalene, went to France, and founded the royal dynasties of Europe—to which author Dan Brown alluded in his religious fairytale *The DaVinci Code*. Such claims are more than ridiculous. They are blasphemous, contrary to Scripture, and offered in the desperate hope that denying Christ's death on the cross will also undermine Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday, the Gospel, and the Christian Faith itself.

Yet, ironically, even Christ's first-century enemies did not dispute His death. After the First Easter, their fabrication

was that disciples had stolen the Savior's dead body. They wanted Christ dead and knew with certainty that He had died. They were there. They had eyewitness accounts—not simply from disciples like John who said, **“The man who saw it has given testimony; and his testimony is true,”** John 19:35. They also had the eyewitness testimony of the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus and the religious leaders who stood at the cross reviling Jesus and the funeral entourage that removed the dead body of Jesus from the cross. No easy task, pulling the iron spikes from the body or the body from the iron spokes; then lowering the dead weight of a dead body from a height of perhaps nine feet.

And they had the unmistakable forensic evidence of that soldier's spear. As stated in John 19:32-34, **“The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus *and found that He was already dead*, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.”**

Many physicians and forensic experts have studied the suffering and death of Jesus Christ; specifically, the physical traumas and injuries that caused His death—in a sense, a literary autopsy; that is, an autopsy based on the record of Scripture. As I've said before, though Scripture describes the passion of Christ in relatively bloodless terms, there was blood everywhere. His precious blood.

Already in Gethsemane, Jesus began to sweat great drops of blood; a fact recorded in Luke 22:44. And remember, Luke was a physician. Modern physicians refer to this rare condition as Hematidrosis. It happens when small capillaries

break and blood leaks into the sweat glands. And its cause is extreme emotional stress. For Jesus, what could have been more stressful than knowing the torturous agonies He would soon endure, or the hell He would suffer for our sakes? No wonder He sweat great drops of blood. No wonder He earnestly prayed: **“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will,”** Matthew 26:39.

Furthermore, after hours of interrogation—no food, no drink, no sleep, no sympathy—Jesus was scourged with the Roman flagellum; a whip made of leather straps tipped with metal balls or jagged rocks. Many victims of this type of flogging died before they reached the cross.

According to one surgeon who studied this cruel punishment, scourging left the back an unrecognizable mess of blood and torn flesh. Isaiah prophetically described this appearance of Jesus seven centuries before the Savior was born, saying: **“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness,”** Isaiah 52:13. And on that marred, bleeding back, Jesus was forced to carry the 100-pound patibulum or crossbeam of the cross nearly six hundred and fifty yards, from the Fortress of Antonia to the execution site of Golgotha—until, at length, along the way, exhausted and suffering enormous blood loss, He finally stumbled beneath its weight.

Then followed the indescribable agony of crucifixion: the spikes driven through wrists and feet; the dislocated bones; the shame of being crucified naked; and perhaps worst of all, the constant struggle to breathe. Most deaths by cross were slow deaths of suffocation. Breaking the legs hastened death, not simply because of added pain, but because broken legs would make it impossible for victims to push themselves up on

the cross to exhale trapped air and gasp for fresh air. Yet, given the pain of the cross, perhaps many welcomed broken legs as a twisted form of mercy.

But in addition to all this, Jesus was also carrying the weight, guilt, and punishment of the world's sins—mine, yours, ours, everyone's. As the prophet wrote, **"The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,"** Isaiah 53:6. Most of us have felt the enormous weight and guilt of just one sin; like David did after committing adultery with Bathsheba, saying, **"My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long,"** Psalm 32:3. Imagine the weight and guilt Jesus carried.

According to many medical experts who've studied the death of Christ: When that soldier's spear was thrust upward into Jesus' side, it likely pierced the pericardial sac surrounding the Savior's heart. A sac and also lungs filled with fluid from all the traumatic injuries. Fluid which eventually compressed and stopped the Savior's heart. Yet, even here His life was not taken from Him. He gave it up. As written in the Passion History, John 19:30, **"When He had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."**

One medical article I read stated that Jesus died of a broken heart. Another said that He died of heart failure. This may be true medically. But Scripturally, I would argue just the opposite. Jesus died because His heart did not fail; because He loved us to the very end of His life and the very end of His redemptive work; as stated in Hebrews 12: **"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."**

Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

This is why the Bible records the death of Jesus in so many ways and places—the complete and irrevocable giving of Himself through death pictured in every Old Testament sacrifice and stated unequivocally in the New Testament, including the account of the spear that pierced the side of Christ and the account His certified burial and the account of the three days He spent in the grave.

For in the certainty of His death lies the certainty of our salvation; the certainty that our debt before Almighty God has been PAID IN FULL; the certainty that when Jesus Christ cried out from the cross, “it is finished,” our salvation really was finished. Nothing left undone. Nothing left for us to do but to receive this salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

And so the Scriptures declare: **“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,”** Ephesians 1:7; and, **“The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin,”** 1 John 1:7; and, **“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification,”** Romans 4:25; and, **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”** 1 Peter 1:18-19; and, **“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God,”** 1 Peter 3:18; and so many, many more passages.

Or in the words of our next hymn: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not

trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand." LH 370:1.

My friends, you and I go through times and circumstances when, like Paul, we look at our lives and sins and failings and cry out, 'What a wretched person I am.' All true. Yet, God has completely forgiven us through the death of Jesus Christ. And of this that soldier's spear is a blessed reminder—yes, a reminder of Christ's death, but also in His willing death, a reminder of how much God loves us, how much God wants us, how God will always provide for us, supplying all that we need for this life and the next. Surely, this is what Paul meant in Romans 8:32 when he wrote: **"He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?"** Romans 8:32.

Perhaps we should keep a replica of a Roman spear in a room of our home. Perhaps we should look at it whenever we feel unwanted, lost, forgotten, unsaved, and unforgiven. Perhaps we should remember that the original Roman spear carried by the Roman soldier on Golgotha was once stained with the blood of God. Because that spear tells a story. That spear says "Jesus died for me." That spear says "I am forgiven." And that spear says something more.

Second, the soldier's spear reminds us of God's absolutely faithfulness. And if you are wondering how, listen again to the last two verses of tonight's text, John 19:36-36. **"These things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of His bones will be broken,' and, as another Scripture says, 'They will look on the One they have pierced.' "**

“Not one of His bones will be broken” refers to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12; that is, specific regulations regarding the celebration of the Jewish Passover, and how the spotless lamb sacrificed, of which Jesus Christ was always the true fulfilment—for which reason John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the Israelites, saying, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,”** John 1:29—how the bones of the paschal Lamb were never to be broken. The psalmist also prophesied, **“He protects all His bones, not one of them will be broken,”** Psalm 34:20.

Likewise, the words **“They will look on the One they have pierced”** are taken from Zechariah 12:10, which reads: **“They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”**

Friends, these prophecies were made centuries before Jesus Christ was even born. And on Good Friday, when the Roman soldiers had no need to break the legs of Jesus, and subsequently, a soldier thrust a spear into Christ’s side, these very prophecies and promises of God were fulfilled to the letter. Now, do you think anything in this world or any detail of your life is beyond God’s control? Do you think He will somehow fail to faithfully fulfill every promise He has made to you? Never. And of this that soldier’s spear is the proof.