

JOHN 19: 16-18a
“TORMENT” ON THE “HEAD”

“Then he [Pontius Pilate] delivered Him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led Him away. And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him.”

Does crucifixion involve the “head”? Not really. A criminal was fastened on a cross, perhaps with ropes first, but then nailed through hands and feet. That is how it was with Jesus. Later when He showed Himself to His disciples on Easter evening, He said to them, “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself” (Luke 24:39). In crucifixion the criminal was also supported to a degree by a block behind the rump. Suspended in this way, He was left to die by suffocation—a slow, torturous process. The “head” was not involved.

Our text comes at the very end of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate the governor. Pilate found Jesus was innocent, but finally relented to the demands of the Jews and gave the crucifixion order. *They took Jesus and led Him away.* “They” surely includes the soldiers in charge of the crucifixion and the vehement leaders of the Jews as well. He was *led*. Blind people are led, lest they fall or get hurt. Jesus was not blind. Children are led; lest they go astray. Jesus was not a child. Lost people are led, lest they never figure it out. Jesus was not lost. Prisoners are led, lest they run away. Jesus was a prisoner, being led to His execution—the holy Son of God, with love for all the world, held a prisoner, and led to His death! Unlike common criminals, He was not about to run, although He could have at any time. Jesus was more than a prisoner. Think of the Old Testament sacrifices, animal sacrifices, animals unwittingly being led to their death. Jesus was the human sacrifice for sin, for your sins. He willingly went to His death to gain your forgiveness and freedom. *He was wounded for our transgression; He was buried for our iniquity. . . . He was led as a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:5-7).* It’s more than just a sad picture—Jesus being led away like a blind man, a helpless child, a lost man, a violent criminal, a witless animal sacrifice. It is truly a masterful picture of love for all—for us, for you (plural)—for you (singular). Jesus willingly went to be punished in your place, as if saying to you, “Don’t worry, dear brother; don’t worry dear sister; I am taking care of this for you.” Through Him you, though guilty before God, are pronounced Not Guilty and released from punishment! Your sins are completely “given” away, forgiven. Blessed be Jesus! He was led away for us.

He went, *bearing His cross*. He was forced to carry His own means of death—on His back already aflame from the scourging. It was a further humiliation and degradation—like telling a man to get the rope for his own hanging, or to “wheel in” the electric chair and get the extension cord for his own execution. Jesus carried the cross at least part way. We know from the other Gospels that the soldiers forced a man who was traveling into town, Simon of Cyrene, to carry it the rest of the way.

The Greek word for “cross” simply means a post, a pike, a pylon, standing in the ground, or driven into the ground. The word itself contains nothing to specify a crosspiece. A cross was a pole used for suspending someone until dead. Like catching a pesky rabbit in the yard or garden, nailing it to a wooden fence post, allowing it to hang there until dead. Cruel. The Latin word for “cross” apparently of itself also has nothing to do with an “X” shape, “T” shape, or crossbar. The Latin word for “cross” in its root meant “trouble” or “torment.” If someone was fastened on a pole to die, truly it was torment. The pole, itself came to be called a “torment,” a “cross.” To execute someone in that fashion was to put them to “torment”—to “crucify” them. The horizontal bar must have become a natural feature for such execution purposes.

How big was the cross? How much did it weigh? We can estimate. A criminal’s body would only need to be raised two or three feet above the dirt, not five or six. The pole would be sunk in the ground two or three feet. The entire “torment” would have to be ten to twelve feet long. We know a twelve foot 4x4 weighs about 40 pounds. Likely the pole was heavier than a 4x4. Maybe 8x8? The weight would increase fourfold—about 160 pounds. Plus the crossbar—another 60 pounds. Not a light load by any means. No wonder someone had to help carry the cross the rest of the way for Jesus. However, the biggest burden Jesus was carrying was not the cross, but the load of the world’s sins. You’ve heard of a ballplayer who carries the team on his back? Jesus was carrying every sinner on His back, laboring his way to Calvary to be punished for them. What was Jesus thinking? Perhaps, “Just keep pushing ahead. Just keep pushing ahead. They will never make it if I don’t. They will never make it if I don’t.” Thank you, Savior.

*He . . . went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. “Golgotha”—or “Calvary” in Latin—is interesting place and concept for our study. In the Old Testament a word closely related to “golgotha” is used in the account of the death of wicked Queen Jezebel. The new king Jehu who had assassinated her son King Joram, trampled her body in the streets. After banqueting he ordered that her remains be buried. All that could be found was head—“golgotha—hands and feet; the dogs had taken the rest. ----- We do not know the exact location of Golgotha. The text says Jesus went “out.” It was outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Hebrews 13:12 tells us Jesus suffered *outside the gate*. The Bible does not say that Golgotha or Calvary was in fact a “hill.” Christian writings from as early as the 500’s and 600’s AD considered it that way. We have hymns speak of it that way—“Come to Calvary’s Holy Mountain“ and “There is a Green Hill Far Away.” ----- Why was the place called “skull”? Was it a common place of execution? Were criminals sometimes beheaded there? Could skull be found on the ground? It seems not. The Jews did not punish by decapitation; the Romans used crucifixion—except for Roman citizens. Perhaps the place was a hill which looked like a person’s cranium or skull? Possibly. Today’s site labeled Golgotha is such a hill.*

Either way, a flat or a hill, Golgotha was/is an appropriate name for the place Jesus died. The Bible talks about criminals bearing their guilt on their head. In King Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the new temple, he said , *O Lord . . .hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness (I Kings 8:32).* Golgotha indeed was a place of punishment, a place where the sins of criminals were brought upon their heads. To Golgotha, Jesus carried our guilt and our sins on His head. Remember the scapegoat? The High Priest laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat and confessed all the people’s sins transferring them to the goat. That goat was sent into the uninhabited wilderness never to return. The sins were gon (Leviticus 16). At Golgotha, Jesus had our sins on His head. Or we could say, Jesus had “a price on his head” before God—serving as our vicarious sacrifice, our substitutionary sacrifice.

Another thought. Jesus often called Himself “The Son of Man.” Jesus was the representative and “head” of all mankind when He came to be offered as the sacrificial lamb for the redemption for all. *God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing men’s trespasses upon them (II Corinthians 5:19).* It was fitting that the punishment for sin should be disbursed at the “place of the head.” The Bible also specifically identifies Jesus as the “head of the Church—capital “C”—the invisible gathering of all believers of all time. *The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church, and He is the Savior of the body (Ephesians 5:23).* As your head and your master, Jesus took His headship role very seriously and very tenderly. *Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:26).* The Bible does not specifically make these connections with “Golgotha” but it hardly seems an “accident” that Jesus Head of the Church should die at a place called Golgotha.

One more item. What was it that God told Satan in the Garden after the first sin? *I will put enmity [fighting] between you [Satan] and the woman, between your seed and her Seed [Jesus]. He [her Seed—Jesus] shall bruise your HEAD, and you shall bruise His heel (Genesis 3:15).* At Golgotha, or Calvary, or place of the skull, Jesus carried out the fulfillment of God’s promise. Satan was bruised in the head. There Jesus broke Satan’s power over us. In Jesus’ payment of His innocent death before the Father, indeed, IT WAS FINISHED! The devil’s stranglehold on sinful man was broken. The sinless man, the God-Man, paid the impossible price to redeem us from sin. Jesus’ resurrection declares the guarantee of that payment in full. *Because I live, you will live also (John 14:19)!*

At Golgotha your “Head” (with capital “H”)—Jesus— bruised and broke Satan’s head and power forever by suffering the “torment,” the cross. Blessed events at Golgotha!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---