

Did Jesus Suffocate?

Do you know why the legs of the two thieves crucified with Jesus were broken?

The Jews did not want the bodies of the condemned hanging on the crosses on the Sabbath. They wanted them to die so that their bodies could be removed before it began. It was obviously done, then, to hasten their death (Jn. 19:31-33).

Yet, broken legs are not fatal and certainly not immediately so. So, what was the connection between breaking the thieves' legs and hastening their deaths?

Breaking the thieves' legs was apparently intended to prevent them from supporting their bodies. This was necessary for them to breathe. Otherwise, their bodies would hang by their hands, which were fastened to the cross. This position made breathing difficult, if not impossible.

The victims would soon suffocate. A foot-support, or suppedaneum, was attached to the base of the cross to give the victims, whose knees were flexed, something to push against to raise themselves to breathe more freely.

But were there not more efficient ways to kill them quickly? Sure there were. After all, upon approaching Jesus and finding Him already dead, a soldier pierced His side with a spear. So, weapons to effect a quick killing were readily available.

Yet, this misses the whole point of crucifixion as a method of execution. It was intended to prolong the process of dying and intensify its agony. This was so true that, even when the Romans wanted a crucified person to die quickly, they still did not want him to die instantaneously. They wanted to see the victim experience death throes.

This brings up a comment by Helmut Koester, a professor at Harvard Divinity School. He claims as an example of the "unhistorical" nature of John's Gospel "the account of the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' mother standing at the foot of the cross. No words would have been uttered by a person dying of asphyxiation on a cross" (Biblical Archaeology Review, Nov./Dec. 2007, pg. 76). He refers to the occasion when Jesus, while on the cross, identified His mother as His disciple's mother and His disciple as His mother's son, thus turning her care over to him (19:26,27). The irony is that this statement is recorded a few verses prior to the account of the thieves' legs being broken. There is no indication that Jesus was dying of asphyxiation at the time He uttered these words, and there is no proof that asphyxiation was the cause of His death. Six hours upon a cross was not necessarily enough to cause a person to suffocate, since, after Jesus died, the legs of the thieves had to be broken to cause them to smother.

One should never be afraid to challenge the "experts." They are capable of profound bias and illogic. The only reasonable explanation for Koester's conclusion is a resolve to discredit the Scriptures so deep that it will resort to the most obviously fallacious and silly arguments. In other words, he just does not care what the truth is!

Yet, more is expected of brethren. Their obedience to the gospel will extend itself in an uncompromising commitment to truth. Yet, one of the most disappointing aspects of life as a Christian is the creeping awareness, verified in numerous instances, that brethren are

often no better than unbelievers in this regard. Scriptures are cited but simply dismissed and those who cite them scorned. It soon becomes apparent that truth just does not matter - and nothing can be done about it. It surely vies to be the saddest and most tragic spectacle ever to confront the lover of souls and truth.

By Gary Eubanks