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4-7-2017

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Recommended Citation

Office of University Communications, "GWU Forensics Expert Discusses the Physical Death of Jesus from Medical Examiner's Perspective" (2017). *Gardner-Webb NewsCenter Archive*. 640.
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GWU Forensics Expert Discusses the Physical Death of Jesus from Medical Examiner's Perspective

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Office of University
Communications

April 7, 2017

Biology Instructor Jay Zimmer Shares Theories About the Physiological Effects of Christ's Suffering

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – On Easter Sunday, observed this year on April 16,

a cross at sunset

Christians around the globe will celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Gardner-Webb University Instructor of Biology Jay Zimmer believes that medical science can offer a revealing perspective into aspects of Christ's suffering that aren't typically pondered by believers.

"In the Protestant faith, we often don't spend much time really delving into the immense suffering Jesus endured. I think we would much rather gloss over it," Zimmer reflected. "I have discovered that using science to look more deeply into the events leading up to the crucifixion has deepened my own personal faith and helped me celebrate Easter Sunday with more focus and intention."

"I think of Jesus as the obedient Jew," Zimmer shared. "He perfectly fulfilled the Law. As he began his earthy ministry, he was identified by John the Baptist as 'the Lamb of God.' At some point, he must have known that he would be the ultimate sacrifice."

As Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest, scriptures reference his sweat falling to the ground like drops of blood, indicating an experience of intense psychological anguish. "Although it is a rare condition called hematohidrosis, it is well documented," Zimmer explained. "If a person is extremely stressed, it can activate their autonomic nervous system, the sympathetic 'fight-or-flight' response followed by the parasympathetic, which can cause blood vessel diameters to change." Since many blood vessels are close to the sweat glands, Zimmer shares, it is a very short distance for blood to get into the sweat.

Following his arrest by soldiers in the Garden, physical torture soon followed. In addition to being repeatedly hit, kicked, and

photo of spines

spat upon by the guards, Pilate ordered Jesus be flogged/scourged [beat repeatedly with a flagellated whip]. Some theologians believe that Pilate may have thought the scourging would be enough to satisfy the religious establishment. But eventually, they asked for the crucifixion.

“It was very routine for scourging to be done before a Roman execution,” Zimmer offered. “They would put the most torturous things into the whip—lead balls, pieces of glass, dice, sheep bones—whatever they could find. The lead balls would cause severe bruising, the bones or glass would tear away the skin. A lot of people would have broken bones. Often, they would go into shock. The kidneys would shut down, followed by sweating and convulsions and an erratic heartbeat. Many people didn’t make it past these floggings. And they gave Jesus an extra dose. They worked him over.”

The goal of crucifixion was not to kill the person immediately, but to inflict the most pain in a sentence of death. “The message of crucifixion was to tell the population, ‘We are

Jay Zimmer, GWU Instructor of Biology

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Rome and you are not. And you need to know your place,” he said. “Most historians believe Jesus carried the top crossbeam—which probably weighed 130 to 150 pounds—to Golgotha. So Jesus had to carry this very rough timber on his back—and his back was shredded from the scourging.”

Once on the cross, the victim would often endure hours of additional suffering. A common theory is that individuals would essentially suffocate from a lack of oxygen. So what was the cause of death in Jesus? “Most of the people with strong medical training who have looked at the crucifixion would say asphyxiation, cardiogenic shock, arrhythmia, or something like that,” Zimmer reflected. “The most interesting clue is in scripture. Jesus was talking and had his senses about him the whole time. At the very end, he says in a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Zimmer continued. “I hesitate to pick a theory where things are winding down gradually—like asphyxiation or shock. The natural theory is that maybe his heart just ruptured. I know that’s a somewhat romantic notion, in a sense, believing that Jesus died of a broken heart.

“Another theory is that maybe Jesus couldn’t be killed and that maybe he had to freely give up his life,” he shared. “I can see the reasoning for that theory, too. All throughout his suffering, there were so many moments where he should have already died from a multiplicity of injuries. How he stayed alive so long and was able to talk is mind-boggling from a medical perspective.”

Zimmer remains amazed at the heart of Christ to minister to others up to the very end. “It blows me away to consider the depth of his love,” he stated. “A lot of times, when we’re alone with our thoughts at night, we may wonder, ‘Does God really exist? Does God love me? Does God know what I’m going through?’ We may not have perfect answers to those questions, but sometimes we just have to meditate on the tragedy and the love and the unselfishness of what we see at the cross. That, I find, is just beyond comprehension.”

To listen to the full WGWG.org interview with Jay Zimmer, click below:

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