

In hopes of understanding the full impact of the physical torment Jesus endured at the hands of his captors let us turn to the gospel accounts and the writings of best-selling author Lee Strobel and his well known work, *The Case for Christ*.<sup>1</sup>

Read Lee Strobel's account below of his interview with Dr. Alexander Metherell, M.D., PH.D.

...“It began after the Last Supper,” he said. “Jesus went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives—specifically, to the Garden of Gethsemane. And there, if you remember, he prayed all night. Now, during that process he was anticipating the coming events of the next day. Since he knew the amount of suffering he was going to have to endure, he was quite naturally experiencing a great deal of psychological stress.”

I raised my hand to stop him. “Whoa—here’s where skeptics have a field day,” I told him. “The gospels tell us he began to sweat blood at this point. Now, c’mon, isn’t that just a product of some overactive imaginations? Doesn’t that call into question the accuracy of the gospel writers?”

Unfazed, Metherell shook his head. “Not at all,” he replied. “This is a known medical condition called hematidrosis. It’s not very common, but it is associated with a high degree of psychological stress.

“What happens is that severe anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. As a result, there’s a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out tinged with blood. We’re not talking about a lot of blood; it’s just a very, very small amount.”

Though a bit chastened, I pressed on. “Did this have any other effect on the body?”

“What this did was set up the skin to be extremely fragile so that when Jesus was flogged by the Roman soldier the next day, his skin would be very, very sensitive.”

Well, I thought, here we go. I braced myself for the grim images I knew were about to flood my mind. I had seen plenty of dead bodies as a journalist—casualties of car accidents, fires, and crime syndicate retribution—but there was something especially unnerving in hearing about someone being intentionally brutalized by executioners determined to extract maximum suffering.

“Tell me,” I said, “what was the flogging like?”

Metherell’s eyes never left me. “Roman floggings were known to be terribly brutal. They usually consisted of thirty-nine lashes but frequently were a lot more than that, depending on the mood of the soldier applying the blows.

“The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, these balls would cause deep bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. And the whip had pieces of sharp bone as well, which would cut the flesh severely.

“The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down to the back, the buttocks, and the back of the legs. It was just terrible.”

“One physician who has studied Roman beatings said, ‘As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh.’ A third-century historian by the name of Eusebius described a flogging by

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts taken from Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, (1998) p. 194-200.

saying, 'The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.'

"We know that many people would die from this kind of beating even before they could be crucified. At the least, the victim would experience tremendous pain and go into hypovolemic shock."

Metherell had thrown in a medical term I didn't know. "What does hypovolemic shock mean?" I asked.

"*Hypo* means 'low,' *vol* refers to volume, and *emic* means 'blood,' so hypovolemic shock means the person is suffering the effects of losing a large amount of blood," the doctor explained. "This does four things. First, the heart races to try to pump blood that isn't there; second, the blood pressure drops, causing fainting or collapse; third, the kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left; and fourth, the person becomes very thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume."

"Do you see evidence of this in the gospel accounts?"

"Yes, most definitely," he replied. "Jesus was in hypovolemic shock as he staggered up the road to the execution site at Calvary, carrying the horizontal beam of the cross. Finally Jesus collapsed, and the roman soldier ordered Simon to carry the cross for him. Later we read that Jesus said, 'I thirst,' at which point a sip of vinegar was offered to him. "Because of the terrible effects of this beating, there's no question that Jesus was already in serious to critical condition even before the nails were driven through his hands and feet."

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As distasteful as the description of the flogging was, I knew that even more repugnant testimony was yet to come. That's because historians are unanimous that Jesus survived the beating that day and went on to the cross-which is where the real issue lies.

These days when condemned criminals are strapped down and injected with poisons, or secured to a wooden chair and subjected to a surge of electricity, the circumstances are highly controlled. Death comes quickly and predictably. Medical examiners carefully certify the victim's passing. From close proximity witnesses scrutinize everything from beginning to end.

But how certain was death by this crude, slow, and rather inexact form of execution called crucifixion? In fact, most people aren't sure how the cross kills its victims. And without a trained medical examiner to officially attest that Jesus had died, might he have escaped the experience brutalized and bleeding but nevertheless alive?

I began to unpack these issues. "What happened when he arrived at the site of the crucifixion?" I asked.

"He would have been laid down, and his hands would have been nailed in the outstretched position to the horizontal beam. This crossbar was called the patibulum, and at this stage it was separate from the vertical beam, which was permanently set in the ground."

I was having difficulty visualizing this; I needed more details. "Nailed with what?" I asked. "Nailed where?"

"The Romans used spikes that were five to seven inches long and tapered to a sharp point. They were driven through the wrists," Metherell said, pointing about an inch or so below his palm.

"Hold it," I interrupted. "I thought the nails pierced his palms. That's what all the painting show. In fact, it's become a standard symbol representing the crucifixion."

"Through the wrists," Metherell repeated. "This was a solid position that would lock the hand; if the nails had been driven through the palms, his weight would have caused the skin to

tear and he could have fallen off the cross. So the nails went through the wrists, although this was considered part of the hand in the language of the day.”

“And it’s important to understand that the nail would go through the place where the median nerve runs. This is the largest nerve going out of the hand, and it would be crushed by the nail that was being pounded in.”

Since I have only a rudimentary knowledge of the human anatomy, I wasn’t sure what this meant. “What sort of pain would that have produced?” I asked.

“Let me put it this way,” he replied. “Do you know the kind of pain you feel when you bang your elbow and hit your funny bone? That’s actually another nerve, called the ulna nerve. It’s extremely painful when you accidentally hit it.

“Well, picture taking a pair of pliers and squeezing and crushing that nerve,” he said, emphasizing the word *squeezing* as he twisted an imaginary pair of pliers. “That effect would be similar to what Jesus experienced.”

I winched at the image and squirmed in my chair.

“The pain was absolutely unbearable,” he continued. “In fact, it was literally beyond words to describe; they had to invent a new word: *excruciating*. Literally, *excruciating* means ‘out of the cross.’ Think of that: they needed to create a new word, because there was nothing in the language that could describe the intense anguish caused during the crucifixion.”

“At this point Jesus was hoisted as the crossbar was attached to the vertical stake, and then nails were driven through Jesus’ feet. Again, the nerves in his feet would have been crushed, and there would have been a similar type of pain.”

Crushed and severed nerves were certainly bad enough, but I needed to know about the effect that hanging from the cross would have had on Jesus. “What stresses would this have put on this body?”

Metherell answered, “First of all, his arms would have immediately been stretched, probably about six inches in length, and both shoulders would have become dislocated—you can determine this with simple mathematical equations.

“This fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy in Psalm 22, which foretold the crucifixion hundreds of years before it took place and says, ‘My bones are out of joint.’”

“...Once a person is hanging in the vertical position,” he replied, “Crucifixion is essentially an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation.”

“the reason is that the stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the tarsal bones.

“After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath in. Again he’d have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn’t be able to push up and breathe anymore.”

“As the person slows down his breathing, he goes into what is called respiratory acidosis—the carbon dioxide in the blood is dissolved as carbonic acid, causing the acidity of the blood to increase. This eventually leads to an irregular heartbeat. In fact, with his heart beating erratically, Jesus would have known that he was at the moment of death, which is when he was able to say, ‘Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ And then he died of cardiac arrest.”

“...Even before he died—and this is important, too—the hypovolemic shock would have caused a sustained rapid heart rate that would have contributed to heart failure, resulting in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart, called a pericardial effusion, as well as around the lungs, which is called a pleural effusion.”

“...the Roman soldier came around and, being fairly certain that Jesus was dead, confirmed it by thrusting a spear into his right side. It was probably his right side; that’s not certain, but from the description it was probably the right side, between the ribs.

“The spear apparently went through the right lung and into the heart, so when the spear was pulled out, some fluid—the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion—came out. This would have the appearance of a clear fluid, like water, followed by a large volume of blood, as the eyewitness John described in his gospel.”

“...There was absolutely no doubt that Jesus was dead...”