

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

The Skull.

Here is how Luke describes Jesus' final minutes before death on the cross, in Chapter 23, verses 26 to 34:

²⁶ And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. ²⁸ But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We read that Roman soldiers force a man called Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross.

The cross weighs perhaps a bit less than a hundred pounds: maybe Jesus is too weak after being beaten to carry the cross. Interestingly, Cyrene was in today's Libya, on the African coast, about 850 miles away; we presume that Simon came to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover – thus, he would be a very devout Jew. As Jesus and Simon of Cyrene proceed, a great crowd follows, loudly lamenting for Jesus.

The community of Jews have turned on Jesus, apparently disappointed that he is not a worldly Messiah who will raise an earthly army and destroy the Romans. But there are those who still believe in him. Jesus turns to these people, and addresses them as “Daughters of Jerusalem”, which is probably a reference to the Song of Solomon, where this term is used several times. Jesus is noting that these are Jewish people who live in the greater Jerusalem area. This might also be an acknowledgement that women are more likely to believe in him than men. Jesus is repeating a warning that he has already given twice before as he was approaching Jerusalem in his final days. What he is saying is that they should not be sad for him, but for themselves and their children. He describes complete destruction, saying:

³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us. Jesus is referring to the Book of Hosea, where we read:

- ⁷ Samaria’s king shall perish
like a twig on the face of the waters.*
- ⁸ The high places of Aven, the sin of Israel,
shall be destroyed.
Thorn and thistle shall grow up
on their altars,
and they shall say to the mountains, “Cover us,”
and to the hills, “Fall on us.”*

In Hosea, the author is using a botanical metaphor to describe God’s judgement of Israel, when the People of God sin. Jesus then goes on to say, “For if

they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" He is calling himself green, but the people of Jerusalem dry. If Jesus can burn so easily at the hands of evil people, given that he is alive spiritually and filled with sap, just imagine how those who have no spiritual sap, who are not innocent, will one day burn. It is believed that this is a reference to the burning of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman army, which will occur in the year 70 A.D. Jesus is warning the people of Jerusalem that what the Romans are doing to him will pale when compared to what they will eventually do to all of Jerusalem.

We then get to the place where Jesus will die. A criminal is placed on either side of him, on their own crosses. Today, we call the place where Jesus was crucified Calvary, which comes from the Latin for "The Skull", the name that Luke uses. Why this area was called The Skull we don't fully know, but the area where we believe Jesus was crucified is a hillside with two large sunken holes, and some say it looks like a skull. As Jesus hangs on his cross, after all the suffering he is going through and is still about to experience, he offers up his own forgiveness by saying: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* This is an incredible act of forgiveness, offered while Jesus is at the height of his torment.

Crucifixion is meant to be horrible, with the victim often taking days to die. Jesus dies far more quickly, apparently in about six hours. Jesus has been whipped,

beaten, and has carried his cross part of the way. Death by crucifixion typically comes from asphyxiation, when the condemned is exhausted and can no longer hold himself up with his feet. Once one can no longer lift his chest up, the weight of his body pulls his diaphragm down, causing air to move into the lungs and stay there. If you can't exhale, you can't breathe. Imagine how people would protest today if we were to carry out capital punishment on someone and death took six hours.

Notice that Jesus offers two things to the people around him in this passage: first, a warning about the cruelty of humanity, in the form of what the Roman army will one day do to Jerusalem, and second, an unconditional forgiveness for those who are in the moment torturing and killing him. That's the lesson of the crucifixion: God offers completely unconditional forgiveness, but God does not free us from the harm perpetrated by our fellow humans. There is another way to look at this. We may be dried and brown, totally lacking in spiritual sap and ready to burst into flames when exposed to the evils wrought upon us by our fellow humans. But God forgives us regardless. God is not brutal and unforgiving, like humans. God could be, if he wanted, the biggest bully imaginable, capable of making humanity suffer in ways that we cannot even imagine. However, God is kind. Humans, in contrast, when given power, tend to exercise that power in grotesque ways. Much

of what is wrong with our modern world has to do with people who wield political, economic, and military power to serve only themselves. They do not serve other people, and they certainly do not serve God.

On this Good Friday, we can thank Jesus Christ for offering us a standard of forgiveness that we can strive for throughout our lives. Jesus gave us a goal. We can also thank Jesus for challenging us to withstand the temptation of power, to not become corrupt when we are capable of exerting control over others.

The word “Good” in Good Friday really means “Holy”. We should call today Holy Friday. We strive for holiness, to forgive without exception or reservation, and to treat all people with respect, love, and kindness, by using whatever power we have in life to serve rather than abuse.

The skull represents death to us. Skull Hill is where Jesus died. But that symbol of a gruesome human death is in truth a symbol of spiritual life for us – because Jesus chose his most horrific moment to give us what just might be the most important advice humanity could ever receive. Jesus challenged us to forgive absolutely and unconditionally. And he challenged us to take whatever power we might accumulate on this planet and wield it with kindness and grace.

Amen.