

What DID Mary know? Did she know that she held her Creator in her arms? When she looked down at her baby at her breast did she know that she was feeding the Son of God? Did she know that her son would heal the sick, walk on water and make the blind to see? Did she know He would be hated and that she would live to see Him die in his early thirties? Did Mary know that the Son she delivered would one day deliver her? The birth of Jesus reads like this...Lk. 2:1-7.

The process of giving birth is a little easier and a lot safer for women today but some things haven't changed – like swaddling. New mothers are encouraged to “swaddle” their baby. A blanket is spread out and the child is placed diagonally across the blanket. Then the corners are all tucked around the child forming a warm cocoon. There are a couple of reasons for this. The tightness of the blanket resembles the coziness of the womb and the child sleeps better that way. Swaddling also restricts the movement of their hands so they won't scratch themselves. Did Mary know any of this? Who knows, but I'm pretty sure that Mary didn't know that when she swaddled her baby she would see Him wrapped in linen again as an adult. Mary didn't know that one day the swaddling cloth would be a burial shroud. This child was born to die.

The birth of Jesus is a lovely scene at least as it's depicted on Christmas cards every year. (slides shown here) A silent night, all is calm, all is bright. Two young first-time parents are surrounded by the wonder of the birth of a little baby boy. As Mary looked into the face of her child she couldn't possibly imagine the horrors that were to come.

The first clue comes some 40 days after Jesus' birth when Mary and Joseph take him up to the temple to be offered to the Lord. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and blesses Him saying in part, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” Lk. 2:34-35. What does this ominous prophecy mean? We find out in Mk. 15.

In the final hours of Jesus' life, He endured the worst cruelty fallen humanity has to offer. He was tried for blasphemy but of course His trials (all six of them) were a joke. There were numerous illegalities overlooked by the Pharisees and Saducees in their haste to get this deed done before sundown, the beginning of the Sabbath. They had to get the Romans to sign off on the execution. So they hauled Jesus off to Pilate, the Roman official. His only question was, “Are you King of the Jews.” (15:2). Pilate had no interest in religious squabbles but he could not tolerate insurrection. If Jesus claimed to be a king, then that was treason and treason was punishable by death. Jesus' cryptic answer, “You say,” is a qualified “yes.” Yes, He was and is King, but not in the worldly sense Pilate was concerned about. Pilate was no dummy. He recognized that this whole trial was motivated by envy and jealousy... 15:10. So he tried to release Jesus but the crowd supported the evil plans of the Jewish leaders. Jesus was handed over to the execution squad.

Mk. 15:16-20. They stripped Him naked and dressed Him in purple. After they had their sadistic fun humiliating Jesus, they put his clothes back on. Then, they stripped Him naked again and lifted Him up on the cross for all to see... 15:22-24

Down through the centuries religious art has depicted the physical suffering Jesus endured. The physical abuse is staggering but there was a spiritual and psychological suffering that surpassed the extent of His physical injuries. Jesus was crucified naked and completely alone. He endured the shame and the ridicule heaped upon Him by those He came to save. The final indignity was the offer of sour wine from a sponge commonly used for hygienic purposes. (v. 36). Jesus had come to earth to rescue and restore a rebel race and what did He get for His efforts? He suffered injustice, shame and humiliation at the hands of evil men.

But the hostility He endured from men was not the worst of it. To die as Jesus died was considered a clear sign of God's disapproval. Dt. 21:23 says, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree." "In OT times criminals were normally executed by stoning and then displayed on a stake to show God's divine rejection. When Christ was crucified, it was evidence He had come under the curse of God." This was a great obstacle to faith for Jews. If He were truly the Son of God why would He be forsaken by His father? vv. 33-34. Why would God the Father curse His Son?

Mark provides an important clue in 14:50-52. A young follower of Jesus is discovered during Jesus' arrest. He is wearing linen. When a soldier grabs him he pulls free and runs naked into the night. He is exposed. The follower becomes a fleer. This is a brilliant literary device. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve we have associated nakedness with shame. The shame Jesus experienced on the cross was not merely symbolic. His arms were stretched out and nailed to the cross making it impossible to cover his most vulnerable parts. This child, born in Bethlehem, came to absorb my shame and bear my punishment for my sin.

This child whose birth we celebrate on Christmas day, was born to die. That baby, wrapped in linen at birth, would wear linen once again in death. Joseph of Arimathea bought a linen cloth, took Him down, "wrapped Him in the linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb." Mk. 15:46.

Like the young man fleeing into the night we have all been exposed. That's the naked truth. "Before we see the cross as something done for us we have to see it as something done by us." John Stott. We are all without excuse. We stand naked before the accuser. But Jesus bore our sin and shame so that we might be clothed in His righteousness just as Isaiah predicted.

But he took our suffering on him
and felt our pain for us.
We saw his suffering
and thought God was punishing him.
5 But he was wounded for the wrong we did;
he was crushed for the evil we did.
The punishment, which made us well, was given to him,
and we are healed because of his wounds.
6 We all have wandered away like sheep;
each of us has gone his own way.
But the LORD has put on him the punishment
for all the evil we have done. Is. 53:4-6

The real impact of this passage is not found in the obvious details of the story. We know how Jesus died but the more important question is why He died. He didn't die because a simple Galilean carpenter was not match for Imperial Rome. He didn't die because He failed to raise an army who would fight for Him. He didn't die because His dream of a kingdom of righteousness was a fantasy. No, He died because that was God's plan for this man. The swaddling cloth proves it. It was a burial shroud.

All the actors in the story were playing roles with eternal implications. "Without knowing it, the religious leaders and Pilate and Barabbas were all part of a tapestry of grace which God was weaving for sinners. Their actions spoke louder than their words, louder than the cries of the crowds for Jesus' blood. Jesus was not dying for His own crimes, but for the crimes of others; not for His own sins, but the sins of others. He did not die for Himself, He died for us." Sinclair Ferguson (quoted by Daniel Akin, *Exposition of Mark*, p. 346) On the cross, Jesus got what we deserved so that we can get what He deserves. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5:21. And all you have to do is say "yes" to His offer of righteousness.

How you do that is not important. Whether you pray a "sinner's prayer," go to the prayer room, or just sit quietly before the wonder of it all. The focus of our salvation is not on what we do but on what Jesus did. When Jesus was on the cross, He actually "became" sin so that we might be clothed in His righteousness. His love covers our shame. When Jesus died, our sin died — all of it, past, present, and future.

That time you committed adultery? It died on the cross.

All that gossip you've shared about your boss? When Jesus' heart stopped beating, it evaporated forever.

Those damaging words you spoke to your spouse or child? There may be some consequences in this life but as an eternal matter it's in the grave.

All of our sin is dead and gone forever, and it died with Christ.

I don't know what Mary knew but I know what I know. And now you know. You may not even know the exact moment you were saved so let me clear it up for you: It was late one afternoon 2,000 years ago on a hill called Calvary. And that's all you need to know.