

## **Did Christ die of a broken heart?**

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## DID CHRIST DIE OF A BROKEN HEART?

(Extracted from Appendix to Dr. Hanna's *Last Day of Our Lord's Passion.*)

MY DEAR DR. HANNA,—Ever since reading, some ten or twelve years ago, Dr. Stroud's remarkable treatise *On the Physical Cause of the Death of Christ*, I have been strongly impressed with the belief that the views which he adopted<sup>1</sup> and maintained on this subject are fundamentally correct. Nor has this opinion been in any way altered by a perusal of some later observations published on the same question, both here and on the Continent.

That the immediate cause of the death of our blessed Saviour was—speaking medically—laceration or rupture of the heart, is a doctrine in regard to which there can be no absolute certainty ; but, assuredly, in favour of it there is a very high amount of circumstantial probability.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Stroud himself points out that Russell, Edwards, Rambach, and other writers, had more or less correctly anticipated him in the belief that Christ had died from rupture or breaking of the heart.



Let me try to state the arguments for this view in the form of a few brief propositions.

I. His death was not the mere result of crucifixion ; for, 1st, The period was too short ; a person in the prime of life, as Christ was, not dying from this mode of mortal punishment in six hours, as He did, but usually surviving till the second or third day, or even longer. 2dly, The attendant phenomena, at the time of actual death, were different from those of crucifixion. The crucified died, as is well known, under a lingering process of gradual exhaustion, weakness, and faintness. On the contrary, Christ cried with a loud voice, and spoke once and again,—all apparently within a few minutes of His dissolution.

II. No known injury, lesion, or disease of the brain, lungs, or other vital organs could, I believe, account for such a sudden termination of His sufferings in death, except (1.) arrestment of the action of the heart by fatal fainting or syncope ; or (2.) rupture of the walls of the heart or larger blood-vessels issuing from it.

III. The attendant symptoms—particularly the loud cry and subsequent exclamations—show that death was not the effect of mortal fainting, or mere fatal arrestment of the action of the heart by syncope.

IV. On the other hand, these symptoms were such as have been seen in cases of rupture of the walls of the heart. Thus, in the latest book published in the English language on Diseases of the Heart, the eminent author, Dr. Walshe, Professor of Medicine in University College, London, when treating of the symptoms indicating death by rupture of the heart, observes, "The hand is suddenly carried to the front of the chest, a piercing shriek uttered," etc. etc. The rapidity of the resulting death is regulated by the size and shape of the ruptured opening. But usually death very speedily ensues in consequence of the blood escaping from the interior of the heart into the cavity of the large surrounding heart-sac or pericardium ; which sac has, in cases of rupture of the heart, been found on dissection to contain sometimes two, three, four, or more pounds of blood accumulated within it, and separated into red clot and limpid serum, or "blood and water,"—as is seen in blood when collected out of the body in a cup or basin in the operation of common blood-letting.

V. No medical jurist would, in a court of law, venture to assert, from the mere symptoms preceding death, that a person had certainly died of rupture of the heart. To obtain positive *proof* that rupture of the heart was the cause of death, a *post-mortem* examination of the chest would be necessary. In ancient times, such



dissections were not practised. But the details left regarding Christ's death are most strikingly peculiar in this respect, that they offer us the result of a very rude dissection, as it were, by the gash<sup>1</sup> made in His side after death by the thrust of the Roman soldier's spear. The effect of that wounding or piercing of the side was an escape of "blood and water," visible to the Apostle John standing some distance off; and I do not believe that anything could possibly account for this appearance, as described by that Apostle, except a collection of blood effused into the distended sac of the pericardium in consequence of rupture of the heart, and subsequently separated, as is usual with *extravasated* blood, into those two parts, viz. (1.) crassamentum or red clot, and (2.) watery serum. The subsequent puncture of the distended pericardial sac would most certainly, under such circumstances, lead to the immediate ejection and escape of its sanguineous contents in the form of red clots of blood and a stream of watery serum, exactly corresponding to that description given in the sacred narrative, "and immediately there came forth blood *and* water,"—an appearance which no other natural event or mode of death can explain or account for.

VI. Mental emotions and passions are well known by all to affect the actions of the heart in the way of palpi-

<sup>1</sup> Its size may be inferred from the Apostle Thomas being asked to thrust not his "finger," but his "hand" into it.—John xx. 27.

tation, fainting, etc. That these emotions and passions, when in overwhelming excess, occasionally though rarely, produce laceration or rupture of the walls of the heart, is stated by most medical authorities, who have written on the affections of this organ ; and our poets even allude to this effect as an established fact,—

“ The grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o’er-fraught heart, and bids it break.”

But if ever a human heart was riven and ruptured by the mere amount of mental anguish that was endured, it would surely—we might even argue *à priori*—be that of our Redeemer, when, during these dark and dreadful hours on the cross, He suffered for sin, the malediction of God and man, “ full of anguish,” and now “ very sorrowful even unto death.”

There are theological as well as medical arguments in favour of the opinion that Christ in reality died from a ruptured or broken heart. You know them infinitely better than I do. But let me merely observe that

VII. If the various wondrous prophecies and minute predictions in Psalms xxii. and lxix., regarding the circumstances connected with Christ’s death be justly held as literally true, such as, “ They pierced my hands and my feet,” “ they part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture,” etc., why should we re-



gard as merely metaphorical, and not as literally true also, the declarations in the same Psalms, "Reproach hath broken my heart," "My heart is like wax, it is melted in the midst of my bowels." And

VIII. Death by mere crucifixion was not a form of death in which there was much, if indeed any, shedding of blood. Punctured wounds do not generally bleed; and the nails, besides being driven through parts that were not provided with large blood-vessels, necessarily remained plugging up the openings made by their passage. The whole language and types of Scripture, however, involve the idea that the atonement for our sins was obtained by the *blood* of Christ shed for us during His death on the cross. But this was assuredly done in the fullest possible sense, under the view that the immediate cause of His dissolution was rupture of the heart, and the consequent fatal escape of His heart- and life-blood from the central cistern of the circulation.

It has always appeared—to my medical mind at least—that this view of the mode by which death was produced in the human body of Christ, intensifies all our thoughts and ideas regarding the immensity of the astounding sacrifice which He made for our sinful race upon the cross. Nothing can possibly be more striking and startling than the appalling and terrible

passiveness with which God as man submitted, for our sakes, His incarnate body to all the horrors and tortures of the crucifixion. But our wonderment at the stupendous sacrifice only increases when we reflect that, whilst thus enduring for our sins the most cruel and agonizing form of corporeal death, He was ultimately "slain," not by the effects of the anguish of His corporeal frame, but by the effects of the mightier anguish of His mind ; the fleshy walls of His heart—like the veil, as it were, in the temple of His human body—becoming rent and riven, as for us "He poured out His soul unto death ;"—"the travail of His soul" in that awful hour thus standing out as unspeakably bitterer and more dreadful than even the travail of His body.

Believe me, my dear Dr. Hanna, ever sincerely yours,

J. Y. SIMPSON, M.D.

52, QUEEN STREET, EDINBURGH,

*May 1, 1862.*



