

Title: The Cross
Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24
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Last week we continued our exploration of the Apostles' Creed as we unpacked this statement:

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,

This week we continue the journey as we reflect on these words:

...suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are the central events of Christianity. This fact is reflected in our bibles. The gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – give us the three year history of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus' death and resurrection happens in one week of those three years – less than 1% of the time covered. And yet approximately a third of all that is written in the gospels is about that one week. Make no mistake, without the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christian faith would not exist. This week we are going to focus on the first part of the story – the suffering death of Jesus.

Crucifixion as a form of execution can be traced back to the 9th century before Christ. History tells us that in 518BC King Darius of Persia crucified 3000 Babylonian prisoners. In 332BC Alexander the Great crucified 2000 prisoners in Tyre. In 71BC 120,000 men led by Spartacus in a slave uprising fell in battle to the Romans. Six thousand of the men captured were crucified along either side of 120 miles of the Appian Way – a highway leading out of the city of Rome. In 4AD there was an uprising in and around Jerusalem which resulted in the Romans crucifying 2000 Jews.

The Persians may have pioneered crucifixion and the Greeks continued to use it under Alexander, but the Romans perfected it. The pain of crucifixion was so horrendous that a word is derived from it – excruciating. Excruciating is derived from the Latin cruciare, which means torment, which is in turn derived from the Latin crux, or cross. And it was excruciating pain.

The Romans became expert at prolonging the agony. Crosses came in three basic forms – a T-shape, the shape we are familiar with and still another that has become known as the St. Andrews cross. A victim could stay alive on a cross from 4 hours right up to 9 days, all the time gasping to fill their lungs with breath as the weight of their own body suffocated them slowly.

Crucifixion was an intensely painful death. It was also very public. The Romans used crucifixion as a shock and awe tactic to keep the provinces in line and so deliberately chose highly visible places, like roads and hills, to carry them out. They would often deliberately leave rotting corpses on crosses for weeks, even months as an ongoing reminder the population of their absolute power.

Crucifixion was painful, it was public and it was shameful. Victims would be mocked and spat upon. More often than not, their corpses would be thrown in to the garbage dumps. The nails and wooden cross were more highly valued than the body of the victim. Often victims would be crucified at eye level so that people could look them in the eye and mock them and spit on them. Mostly men were crucified, but occasionally women were as well. When a woman was crucified she was made to face the cross as it was thought inappropriate to watch the face of a woman in such excruciating agony. Crucifixion was reserved by the Romans as punishment for the most despised persons; slaves, criminals, the poor and in exceptional circumstances, Roman citizens found guilty of high treason.

Historians and philosophers spoke of the shame and horror of crucifixion. Cicero called it a most cruel penalty and something that must never be spoke of in polite company. Seneca called it the accursed tree and Josephus recognized it as the most wretched of deaths. In short, in the days of Jesus and the early church, crucifixion was the cruelest, most painful and shame-filled way a person could possibly die. It is not exaggerating to say that there was no worse fate that could befall a person.

But here is the amazing thing. The Christian historian Tertullian, who lived around the time the Apostles' Creed was being formed in the second century AD, tells us that the early church even then was making the sign of the cross over their bodies, hanging crosses around their necks and putting crosses up in their homes. As critical to Christian faith as the resurrection and empty tomb are, it was the death of Jesus that became the central event and symbol of the early church. Mark Driscoll puts it this way:

Early Christians turned a symbol of terror and intimidation into a symbol of salvation and hope.
(Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears)

If one third of the gospels focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus, then most of the rest of the New Testament is commentary on what was achieved by the death of Jesus. In one famous passage, the Apostle Paul comments on the centrality of the Cross to Christian faith:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
(1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24)

Paul wrote these words around two decades after the death of Jesus. For those twenty or more years the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, had been preaching Christ crucified. It is hard for us to comprehend now, but the message of a crucified God would have been deeply offensive to most people who heard it.

First, the Jews longed for a Messiah – a savior who would lead a triumphant victory over the Roman occupiers. For Jews, a crucified God was an oxymoron – a contradiction of terms. Messiah's didn't die. Crucifixion was seen as a sign that person was cursed by God. The Greek word that is translated as 'stumbling block' is skandalon, which is can be translated as something deeply offensive, something that stops a person in their tracks.

Second, for the Greeks, or non-Jews, any God worthy of worship would not die, let alone be executed on a cross. It was just a ridiculous thought - foolish. Roman citizens trained in Greek philosophy were interested in gods who could teach them the secrets of the universe. A dead messiah could teach them nothing.

In 1857 an ancient ruin was carefully excavated by archaeologists. The building, which dated back to the 1st century, was used by the Emperor Caligula, and later as a boarding school for boys. Amongst other things, the archaeologists uncovered on one wall some ancient graffiti, which is dated around the end of the second century – coincidentally about the time the earliest forms of the Apostles' Creed was being formed.

This is the graffiti.

Here is tracing of it.

It shows a figure being crucified. It is a human body, but with a donkey's head. There is a figure alongside with one arm raised in a posture of worship. And there is some writing in ancient Greek, which translated reads: 'Alexamenos worships his god.' The Christian historian Tertullian tells us that in the first few centuries Romans derisively accused Christians of onolatry, or worshipping a donkey. For Jews and Gentiles alike, worshipping a crucified God was utter foolishness, equivalent to bowing down to a donkey.

Jews saw the cross of Christ as powerless, and Romans trained in Greek philosophy thought it foolish.

But Paul was defiantly saying the contrary; that the Cross of Christ was the source of all divine wisdom and the demonstration of all of God's power. Paul was saying that in the Cross of Christ is God's power. The word Paul uses for power is *dunamis*, from which we derive our word dynamite.

It is easy for us to think of the resurrection of Jesus as a demonstration of God's power. And it is. What could be more powerful than the miraculous raising of Jesus from the dead? The striking thing is this; it is not the resurrection that Paul says is the power of God; the Cross is the power of God.

We get a hint of this power at the very moment when Jesus dies, Matthew tells us that:

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open.

(Matthew 27:51-52)

It is as if Creation knew something most human beings didn't at that moment; that in the exact moment that Jesus died on the Cross the story of the Universe changed. In the Cross is the power of God.

The central message of Christianity is this; that through his sacrificial death, Jesus transformed a symbol of weakness and death into a symbol of power and life. In the Cross of Christ God demonstrates his explosive, universe-defining, power-soaked love for the world. In the Cross is the power of God.

What does this power achieve?

The Power of the Cross achieves nothing less than victory over sin.

How does the Cross do this?

Much of the New Testament writings of Peter and Paul and others are focused on answering this question.

The Bible teaches us that we have been captivated and captured by sin:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

(Romans 3:23)

Sin is rebellion against God. Sin is turning away from God. Sin is refusing to worship God. Sin is ignoring God. Sin offends God. Sin cannot exist in God's presence.

Paul says that the wages of sin, the consequences of sin is death. Sin involves turning our back on God – the life giver. And when we turn from God, we turn towards death – physical and spiritual.

The pain and suffering that we experience in this world is a direct consequence rebellion against God – sin. We may experience pain and suffering because of the sins we have committed, or it may be a result of the sins of others.

Sin is a mess of our own making. It is a mess we cannot hope to fix – we are morally incapable of doing it. Sin enslaves us. When we turn from God we are incapable of turning back in our own strength. Sin has a magnetic pull that is irresistible. Sin imprisons us in a cell that for which we do not have a key. God knows we can't escape it on our own. And so God made a way.

In the Old Testament God instructed the people of Israel to make atonement sacrifices for their sins. Atonement simply means reconciliation between estranged parties. Our sin has estranged us from God. God is holy and perfect; because

of sin we are not. And so on the Day of Atonement the High Priest would sacrifice a perfect lamb. Even though the people deserved death because of their sin against God, with the lamb God provided a substitute.

One innocent and spotless lamb died instead of tens of thousands of guilty, sin-stained people.

In that moment, on that day, through the blood of the innocent lamb the people living in Israel that day received God's full and complete pardon – the forgiveness of their sins. One died so that many might live.

Writing 30 or so years after Jesus' death on the Cross, Paul says this:

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.
(Romans 3:25)

Paul was saying this; what was foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrificial system – the shedding of innocent blood for the guilty – has been fulfilled completely in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament sacrificial system was not God's Plan A, and then Jesus dying on the Cross, God's Plan B. The Cross was always God's only plan, only strategy to deal with the problem of sin. John the Baptist prophesied this when he saw Jesus and said:

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
(John 1:29)

On the Cross, Jesus the perfect lamb took upon himself the sin of the world and when he died, the power of sin died with him. On the Cross, Jesus took the place that is rightfully ours. He became our substitute. Paul says this:

God made him who had no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
(2 Corinthians 5:21)

On the Cross a cosmic transfer took place; Jesus willingly took upon himself all of our sin, all of our shame, all of our guilt – and not just for us, but for all people for all time.

Jesus experienced alienation so that we might experience reconciliation.

Jesus absorbed our punishment so that we receive forgiveness.

Jesus died so that we might live.

John Stott puts it this way:

The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man.
(John Stott)

Tim Keller says that all life-giving love involves some sort of substitutional sacrifice.

Let me give you an example. Many of us are parents. Our children come into the world in a condition of complete dependence. They cannot hope to grow up as self-sufficient, independent agents unless their parents give up much of their own independence and freedom for years.

If you don't allow your children to hinder your freedom in work and play at all, and if you only get to your children when it doesn't inconvenience you, your children will grow up physically only. In all sorts of other ways they will remain emotionally needy, troubled, and over-dependent. As parents, the choice is clear; you can either sacrifice your freedom or theirs. It's them or you. To love your child well, you must decrease that they may increase. You must be willing to enter into the dependency they have so eventually they can experience the freedom and independence you have.

Keller closes with these words:

All life-changing love toward people with serious needs is a substitutional sacrifice. If you become personally involved with them, in some way, their weaknesses flow toward you as your strengths flow toward them.
(Tim Keller)

The Power of the Cross is this;

Jesus took upon himself our weakness that we might receive his strength.
Jesus encountered the ugliness of sin so that we might encounter the beauty of God's love.
Jesus endured the worst of suffering so that might receive the best of God's healing.
Jesus became what we are so that we could become what he is.

The Cross destroys the power of sin.

Former Catholic Priest and author Brennan Manning wasn't always called Brennan; he was actually christened Richard Manning. While growing up, his best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together.

One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan's life was spared.

When Brennan became a priest he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So he took on the name "Brennan." Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?"

Some of us may have wondered, 'Does God really love me?' Does God really love me when I make mistake after mistake? Does God really love me when I struggle to love myself – to accept myself?

The Cross is the Universe-shaping revelation that not only does God love us, God is love! The Cross screams to us, 'What more could God had done to demonstrate his love?' In Jesus Christ, God himself has voluntarily entered the mess and muck of our sinful world, to live our life and die our death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

In CS Lewis' Narnia book, the Voyage of the Dawn Treader there is a boy called Eustace. He is a nasty boy. He's selfish and mean and no one gets along with him. Despite this, he finds himself magically on a boat, the Dawn Treader, taking a fantastic voyage. The boat pulls into an island which Eustace explores. He finds a cave filled with diamonds and rubies and gold. He thinks to himself, 'I'm rich!' Because of who he was he immediately thinks of ways he can use the riches to hurt the people he doesn't like – the people who have laughed at him or offended him in some way. Eustace falls asleep on the treasure pile, not realizing that it is the hoard of a dragon.

Because he falls asleep thinking greedy dragonish thoughts, when he wakes up he has become a dragon – big and terrible and ugly. He realizes there is no way out; no way off the island. He can't get back on the boat. He will be left there alone and he falls into a deep despair.

One day the great lion Aslan shows up, leads him to a clear pool of water, and tells him to undress and jump in. Suddenly Eustace realizes Aslan means for him to take off the dragon skin. He begins to gnaw and claw off the scales, and he realizes he can shed his skin. Working at it, he finally peels off the skin, but to his dismay, he finds that underneath he has another dragon skin. He tries a second time and a third time – but each time the same thing happens; one dragon skin is peeled back only to reveal another.

In the end, Aslan says 'You are going to have to let me go deeper.' Here is how Eustace tells the story later to others:

I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now...The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt....Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt – and there it was lying in the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker and more knobby-looking than the others had been...Then he caught hold of me and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment....Then I saw...I'd turned into a boy again.

The Power of the Cross is Victory over sin. Through the Power of the Cross Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, is able to peel back the dragon-skin layers of sin that encrust our lives. The Apostle Peter says:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

(1 Peter 2:24)