

Understanding the Cross

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This week I came across an interesting article that listed some of the many religious festivals that go on around the world.

For example, in Thailand there is a festival called Songkran. It's held in mid-march. Buddhist monks chant, people donate money to statues of Buddha and undergo bathing rituals. Fish and songbirds are released to gain merit, and sand carried to temples is planted with flags. All this is to celebrate the coming of Spring and to "pray" for the coming of needed rain.

And then, in Zurich, Switzerland they hold a festival called Sechselauten that involves giant papier-mache ragdolls. The dolls' heads are rigged to explode and the length of time it takes to do so is an answer from pagan gods as to how long winter will be. If it doesn't take long for the doll to blow it's top, that means it will be sunny, long and rain is expected. I'm not sure what it means if the head takes a long time to blow—but it seems to me if they want to know how long winter will last it would be a lot less trouble for them to just get a groundhog like we do here in the good old U.S. of A.!

And then there's a religious festival in Japan where sumo wrestlers hold crying babies. It is believed that a crying baby will scare away demons, hence giving them a long and healthy life.

Here's how it works. Two sumo wrestlers each hold a baby and face each other in the sumo wrestling ring. Then they make weird faces or wear scary masks to make their assigned baby cry. The baby who cries first, the loudest, or the longest, is the eventual winner—although I'm fairly sure the winning baby doesn't FEEL like the winner.

Of course, tour guides in Japan and Switzerland and Thailand explain these religious celebrations to tourists—it's part of learning about different cultures. I bring it up because God may give us the opportunity this Holy Week to be "tour guides" of sorts—explaining what we do every Spring as Christians during these seven days that are referred to as "Passion Week." And if you've brought a neighbor this Palm Sunday—that's great—because I want to begin this year's Passion Week by helping us understand what happened when Jesus Christ died on a cross 2000 years ago. Please come to all our services this Holy Week as we explain why we do what we do.

And at the onset—I want to say that our customs when it comes to Holy Week are based not in superstition like the other festivals I mentioned—but in historical fact. We worship as we do—to remember what actually happened 2000 years ago—and celebrate how those events impact our lives not only today but for all time.

As I said, this morning I want us to focus on the cross—for that is the central symbol of our faith.

Of course, crosses are something we see pretty much everywhere. You can see them perched on the top of church steeples like ours, or carved into gravestones, or engraved in rings, or on decals in car windows, or bumper-stickers on car bumpers. People hang crosses on their living room walls. Crosses are especially popular as necklaces these days—suspended on chains that hang around people’s necks—including the necks of people you wouldn’t associate with the Christian faith. I mean, the cross needs explaining—because it’s not just a symbol to decorate your neck or your wall.

And, speaking of symbols, when you think about it—a cross is a very odd choice. Max Lucado writes, *“Isn’t it strange that a tool of torture would come to embody a movement of hope? The symbols of other faiths are more upbeat: the six-pointed star of David, the crescent moon of Islam, a lotus blossom for Buddhism. But for Christianity—an instrument of execution. (Think of it this way.) Would you wear a tiny electric chair around your neck? Would you suspend a gold-plated hangman’s noose on the wall (in your living room)? Would you print a picture of a firing squad or gas chamber on your business card? Well, we do all of those things with the cross.*

Many Christians make the sign of the cross as they pray. Would you do that with another executioner’s tool? I mean, would you ever think of making the sign of a guillotine before prayer? You know, instead of the triangular touch on the forehead and shoulders, you could symbolize the dropping of the blade with a Karate chop on the palm! Doesn’t quite have the same feel does it?”

So, why a cross? What do we need to know to understand why it is central to our faith as Christians? Of course, as Lucado infers, the symbol of the cross is supposed to remind us, that Jesus Christ, God’s only Son died on one—died there for you and for me. Take your Bibles and turn to Mark 15:22-39 as we read about that—about that day two millennia ago when Jesus Christ died on those intersecting beams of wood.

22 – They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”).

23 – Then they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it.

24 – And they crucified Him. Dividing up His clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

25 – It was nine in the morning when they crucified Him.

26 – The written notice of the charge against Him read: “The King of the Jews.”

27 – They crucified two rebels with Him, one on His right and one on His left.

29 – Those who passed by hurled insults at Him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You Who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days,

30 – come down from the cross and save Yourself!”

31 – *In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked Him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but He can’t save Himself!*

32 – *Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with Him also heaped insults on Him.*

33 – *At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.*

34 – *And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”).*

35 – *When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, He’s calling Elijah.”*

36 – *Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave Him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take Him down,” he said.*

37 – *With a loud cry, Jesus breathed His last.*

38 – *The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*

39 – *And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how He died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”*

One thing I want to stress once again is the fact that Jesus’ death on the cross is indeed central to our faith as Christians. I just read from Mark’s Gospel—the biography of Jesus that he wrote. Well, we see the importance of the cross not only in the gospel of Mark—but in the other Gospels. I mean, one fourth of the material in those books tells about the cross and the final week leading up to it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell us that when it comes to Jesus, everything leads up to—everything points to—everything aims at the cross. It’s almost as if these two rough wooden timbers were literally the “cross-hairs” of His life.

And the rest of the New Testament continues this emphasis. For example, there’s the book of Acts, which is a history of the beginning of churches like this one we’re sitting in—and the preaching in Acts focuses almost completely on the cross. Paul told the church at Galatia, “*May I never boast except in the CROSS of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” (Galatians 6:14) In 1st Corinthians 1:22-24, Paul summarized the heart of the New Testament message by saying, “*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles—but to those who have been brought through the cross to new life in Christ, the cross is the power and wisdom of God.*”

Since the cross is so central to our faith, I want us to take the rest of my time trying to help us all have a deeper understanding of it by answering three basic questions:

First, how did Jesus’ death on a cross come about?

And then second, what was His crucifixion like?

Finally, why did Jesus die in that way?

Let's get started.

(1) First question: How did this itinerant Jewish preacher end up on a Roman cross?

I mean, was the death of the Founder of the Christian faith just another incident in the long history of men and women who died for a worthwhile cause? Was Jesus just one more honorable man killed because He bravely went against the flow?

The Bible affirms the fact that Jesus' crucifixion was not merely something done TO Him; it was something done BY Him. As Jesus Himself said in John 10:18, *"No one takes My life from Me. I lay it down of My own accord."* Jesus was not a helpless victim of this form of execution made popular by the Romans. As God's Son He could have easily prevented the Romans from arresting Him. I mean, He had the power to heal the ear of that guy—the ear Peter sliced off—but He chose not to. In Matthew 26 Jesus told the men come to arrest Him, *"Do you think I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"* No—Jesus GAVE His life. It was not TAKEN from Him. He allowed the soldiers to beat Him and lead Him through the streets and then nail Him to that wooden cross. Jesus was not a defenseless victim of fate; He was not a pitiful martyr. No. Jesus' death was a necessary part—in fact, it was at the core—of God's foreordained plan. As Revelation 13:8 says, Jesus Christ was, *"the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world."*

On Pentecost Sunday—50 days after Jesus' resurrection Peter preached a sermon. And in it he said, that Jesus was, *"nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put to death by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God."* (Acts 2:22-23) In Matthew 20:18-20 Jesus pointedly told His disciples that what was about to happen was no mistake. He basically said, *"Listen guys. We are going to Jerusalem. I will be turned over to the leading priests and the teachers of the law and they will say that I must die. They will give the Son of Man to the non-Jewish people to laugh at Him and beat Him with whips and crucify Him. But on the third day He will be raised to life again."* So, Jesus wasn't trapped by the Jewish religious leaders of His day. He didn't make some sort of miscalculation that last week and as a result was caught and crucified. He knew Judas had betrayed Him and would lead the soldiers to Him that night. Jesus died on purpose—no surprise—no hesitation—no faltering.

In fact, the way Jesus faced His death, the way He resolutely marched to Jerusalem, leaves no doubt. He had come to earth for that moment and He knew it.

We see this illustrated in the crucifixion scenes of Mel Gibson's *The Passion*. Remember? In that powerful film, once Jesus finally arrived at Golgotha, He willingly crawled over to His cross. No one had to force Him. No soldier had to drag Him there or force Him to lay His hands on that crossbeam so they could be nailed there. Jesus' death was no accident. It was God's loving plan all along. More about that later—but that's how the Son of Almighty God ended up on a Roman cross.

Jesus GAVE His life for us. It wasn't TAKEN from Him.

(2) This brings us to our second question—namely—what was His crucifixion like?

Brian Harbour tells of the president of a stained-glass company from Memphis, Tennessee—who visited a church to take measurements for the windows which were to go on each side of the baptistery. The company president was discussing different options for the designs of the windows and asked the pastor, *“Would you object if I put a subtle cross in each of the windows?”* I know what this designer was suggesting, but when we fully understand the kind of death Jesus endured—we know that the words *“subtle”* and *“cross”* — well, they don’t belong together. There was nothing subtle about the cross on which Jesus died. What happened on the Jesus’ cross was not a pretty thing; it wasn’t something you could look at as being unobtrusive. No. His death on the cross was an ugly thing—a stark, shocking, horrific thing.

The truth is, crucifixion is the most brutal torture ever invented by mankind. In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph Klausner, the learned Jewish scholar, wrote, *“Crucifixion is the most terrible and cruel death which man has ever devised for taking vengeance on his fellow man.”*

The Romans, who “perfected” this form of execution, shared his opinion. Cicero called crucifixion, *“the most cruel and horrifying death.”* Tacitus called it, *“despicable.”* And to fully answer this second question, let me remind you what was done to Jesus on the cross. First came a scourging—something that was very accurately portrayed in Gibson’s film. The skin of the victim was literally laid open by numerous lashes with a leather whip that had stone or metal tied to the ends of each strip. It was so incredibly painful victims would often pass out. When they did the Romans often threw salt water on the wounds in order to revive him so they could continue to beat a conscious victim—which helps you understand why they called scourging *“halfway death.”*

After being scourged, the victim was forced to carry his own cross to the place of the crucifixion. He was paraded through the streets with a tablet announcing the charge against Him hung around His neck—or carried before Him while all the time being driven along like cattle by the soldier’s whips. When the gruesome procession finally arrived at the site of the crucifixion the prisoner was stripped of all, or nearly all of his clothing, which became the property of the soldiers. Then the cross was placed on the ground and the exhausted man was thrown backwards with his shoulders against the wood. The soldiers would drive a heavy, square wrought-iron nail through one wrist of the victim and deep into the crossbeam. Quickly he would move to the other side and repeat the action, being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, allowing some flex and movement so as to prolong the suffering. The left foot would then be pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail would be driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees flexed. The cross would then be lifted into place, but not too high. You see, part of the cruelty of crucifixion was to make it so that the criminal would experience the torment of dangling just about the ground. Plus, at that height, his tormenters could easily look him in the face.

I won't go any further in describing what those six hours that Jesus hung there on the Cross was like because it's just too hard to hear. I thought about showing a clip of the Crucifixion from *The Passion of the Christ* because it is a VERY accurate portrayal of that kind of death. But I looked at it and realized it was just—too gruesome—to starkly realistic—to show. If you've seen the movie you know what I mean.

Now—think of that—Jesus' death on the cross was so horrible—we can't show it in a church where we gather to worship Him for what He did there.

(3) This brings me to the last question. Why? Why did Jesus die like that?

I have four answer to this one.

a. First, Jesus died on a cruel cross to show us the results of sin.

I mean, this particular mode of execution showed how ugly, how horrific our sins really are. More and more in our world these days we whitewash sin. We tend to cover up the consequences of immorality. Since our culture believes there is no real difference between right and wrong, people think that "sin" if you want to call it that, is really no big deal. Drink yourself drunk, enjoy an extra-marital fling, embrace hedonism for a couple weeks and don't worry about it. Look at the plots of prime-time Television; go to the most popular movies and you'll have to admit that we tend to "clean up" sin. In essence, we "nice-ify" it—but sin is not nice. It always hurts us. It always pays us back with pain and death. It's hard for us to see this because we live in a fallen world, but the fact is sin is an ugly, filthy thing.

Last week I watched the HBO documentary film, *Conspiracy*. It's based on a meeting that took place on January 20, 1942 in a beautiful villa outside Berlin— an estate taken from a Jewish family. About fifteen high-level Nazi officials including Adolph Eichmann and SS General Heydrich met there to decide how to deal with "*The Jewish Question*." As I said, this gathering took place in a truly beautiful setting. The window looked out on a lovely lake as snow gently fell. The officials were served a sumptuous feast on expensive china in crystal goblets. Expensive cigars were passed out. Eichmann set it all up to look very business-like—but the conversation was anything but beautiful. As I said, their one agenda item was what to do with the Jews. Exporting them to other nations had not worked and the ghettos they had set up to house them were over-crowded and expensive. One official suggested neutering the Jews— taking away their physical means to procreate. Another official countered that that was a good idea—but it would take too long. One suggested shooting them—another said that would take too many bullets and would be too hard on the German soldiers' morale. Dinner conversation included what made a Jew a Jew. What if their grandparents were Jews—what if they converted to Judaism? Is a person is one eighth Jew—is he or she a Jew? One official warned not to exterminate them all because they were needed as workers in the war factories.

Finally, Heydrich revealed the plan—to gas these people and burn the bodies. He showed the math including colorful charts showing how six million people could be “gotten rid of” in less than a year. They chuckled when he shared how the poisonous gas made the bodies turn pink.

And all this was done as they sipped their champagne and munched on hors d’oeuvres sitting around a huge beautiful dining room table in their starched uniforms—looking through the folder of papers full of the data that had been provided for them—like a group of executives would in a corporate conference room in downtown Rockville.

I know this is a stark example—but that’s what our culture does to sin. It makes it look—beautiful—when it is UGLY. Our culture HIDES the consequences of our sinful actions—much as the Nazi’s tried to hide theirs in the ashes that flowed from the ovens at Auschwitz. My point is—that’s why Jesus died the way He did. The reason His death was so brutal is because on that dark day, He bore on His body the brutal consequences of the sins of all mankind. All the brutality, all lies, all the lust, all the selfishness, all the gossip, all the racism, all the greed, all the pride, all the theft, all the murders, all the abuse, all the terrorism—all of it was poured out on Jesus that day.

That’s why He didn’t come to earth in our day and age and die of lethal injection. He died an ugly death because our sin is an ugly thing. Whenever you begin to think of sin as harmless, picture the cross in your mind. Get a copy of *The Passion* and force yourself to watch it. I think we have it in our library. And as you watch, remember that it was our sin—your sin—my sin—that put Jesus there. That’s what He was enduring.

b. A second reason Jesus died as He did was to reveal the unlimited love of God

A pastor named Tim White shares his experience with his son Ryan who was born with several birth defects. He says, *“In the first 15 years of his life, our son Ryan had over 30 surgeries. When he was about eight years old, he was in the hospital for another surgery. The medical staff had already given him the ‘Barney Juice,’ a purple liquid with something like morphine in it. The medical staff then began to roll his surgical bed to the operating room. As usual, we accompanied him to the two big doors that led to the place of surgery. That is where we stopped and told him all would be okay for the last time before surgery. This day, as we got to the doors and they opened, he sat up in the bed, looked me in the eyes and pleaded, ‘Dad, don’t let them take me!’ At that moment, my heart was broken. I would have done anything to take him off that bed except for the fact he had to have the surgery. That knowledge didn’t ease the pain in my heart at all. I just stood there trembling as the doors closed, and he disappeared. That is when I broke down into tears. Shortly after, when I was asking God how such a good love could hurt so much, I realized that He had gone through the same thing. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed: ‘Father, if there is any other way, let this cup pass from Me.’ Translated into the language of a child, ‘Daddy, don’t let them take Me.’ I allowed the*

surgeons to take my son for his own good because I love him. God allowed the crucifiers to take his Son for our good. That is how much God loves us. It has been said that something is worth what someone else is willing to pay. Christ's willingness to give His life on the cross shows the value He placed on me."

Pastor White—is right. The cross is the clearest revelation of God's love. As Romans 5:8 says, *"God commends His love toward us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* And note that phrase, *"while we were yet sinners"* because God let His Son die on the cross—not for a cute eight-year-old—but for filthy sinners like you and me—and even those Nazi demons who met in that room to figure out how to eliminate the Jews.

Jesus died in the way He did, to show us the extent to which God's love would go. If Jesus had refused the cross, if in the end He would have decided to come down from the cross, then there would have been a limit to the love of God—a point beyond which the love of God would not go. But He didn't, so the cross reveals there is no limit. Jesus died for all of us, because God loves all of us. As Jesus said in John 3:16, *"For God so loved THE WORLD, that He gave His only Son, that WHOSOEVER believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

Now, aren't you glad He didn't say, *"For God so loved the rich,"* or *"For God so loved the famous,"* or *"For God so loved the thin,"* It doesn't say that, does it! Nor does it say, *"For God so loved the sober, or the successful, or the young, or the old, or the Republicans, or the democrats."* No, God's love is wide enough for the whole world, which means you're included in that love. I am too! And aren't you glad!? As Lucado puts it,

"Universities exclude you if you aren't smart enough [unless you have rich famous parents who can buy your way in]. Businesses exclude you if you aren't qualified enough—and sadly, some churches exclude you if you aren't good enough, but not God. No, when asked to describe the width of His love, Jesus stretched one hand to the right and the other to the left—and had them nailed in that position so you would know He died loving you!"

I like how Tim Keller puts it. He says, *"Here's the gospel: you're more sinful than you ever dared believe; you're more loved than you ever dared hope."*

And you know, not only does the cross provide undeniable proof of God's great love. It also shows us HOW LONG He has loved us. This truth is seen in the fact that Jesus' death on the cross had been prophesied for hundreds of years. There are numerous prophecies—inescapable references—to the death of Jesus. Some date as far back as nine centuries before His birth, a time in which crucifixion was not even known and yet they describe the death Jesus was to die in stark detail. For example in Psalm 22 David gives us this description of the Savior's death: *"For dogs have surrounded Me; a band of evildoers has encompassed Me; They pierced My hands and My feet. I can count all My bones. They look, they stare at Me; They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots."*(Psalm 22:16-18)

The cross shows that God has loved each of us from the dawn of time. That cross beam helps us to understand what Jeremiah 31:3 means when it says that God has, *“loved us with an everlasting love!”*

c. Here’s a third reason Jesus died on the cross—as payment for our sin.

In 2nd Corinthians 5:21 it says, *“God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”* In 1st Corinthians 5:13 it says, *“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”*

You may be thinking, *“Wait—why can’t God just forgive the debt of sin? If God really does love us, couldn’t He just forget about paying for our sins? You know—Live and let live?”*

Here’s the problem: sin has a cost—it always does. That’s a universal law—so someone has to pay the price. As a simple example, let’s say your neighbor crashes his car through your fence. When you discover the shambles, you forgive him and say, *“Don’t worry about the fence! All is forgiven.”* But forgiving your neighbor doesn’t do away with the damage and the cost of the repair. It just means you eat the cost.

Or, let’s consider a more complex example. Not too many years ago, during the U.S. housing crisis, shoddy banking practices, fat-cat executives, and corporate corruption—threw a sledgehammer into the global economy. Remember? Banks messed up. They lost billions. Bank of America alone owed its customers \$17 billion. Someone had to pay those astronomic costs.

And you remember what happened. In the aftermath of the housing crisis, the banks were deemed *“too big to fail,”* and the government forgave the debt—covering the most expensive bailout of human history. Though the banking industry had caused massive damage, the debt was forgiven. But the debt didn’t go away. Someone else covered it—in this case, the American people—you and me. Someone always eats the cost of a debt.

Well, at the Cross, God was eating the cost of our sin. God forgave the debt by personally covering the cost. In fact, I misspoke earlier when I said the White House gave Wall Street the most expensive bailout of human history. Actually, the most expensive bailout was when the Father established his incarnate Son as the new CEO of a corrupt corporation called Humanity Inc.—and together, they took upon themselves the most outrageous debt-forgiveness plan the world has ever known.

d. Quickly—there’s one more reason Jesus died the way He did—as an invitation.

Remember, when Jesus died, the curtain in the Temple that separated people from the Holy of Holies—the place where God dwelt—was torn in two. The door was literally open to invite sinners like you and me to turn back to God. Through the cross God says to all people, *“Turn from your sin and return to Me. I want to walk with you through life, just as I walked through the garden with Adam and Eve. I want to guide you when you face tough decisions. I want to bear your burdens and share your joys. I want you to know Me. I want things to be as they were before sin came into the world.”* This is what God said through the prophet Isaiah, *“Come let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though they be read like crimson, they shall be as wool.”* (Isaiah 1:18)

Jesus Himself spoke of the cross as God’s invitation when He said, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up—that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. When I am lifted up from the earth, [WHEN I AM LIFTED ONTO THE CROSS] I will draw all men to Myself. [In so doing I will invite all men into relationship with God.]”* (John 3:14-15, 12 ;32) This morning I invite you to respond to God’s invitation.

Let us pray.