

Good Friday, March 29, 2024

**JOHN 19:16–18.** (EHV)

So then Pilate handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus away. Carrying his own cross, he went out to what is called the Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him with two others, one on each side, and Jesus in the middle.

We confess in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ, [God the Father's] only Son, our Lord, who...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried."

Crucifixion is so intimately associated with Jesus, so intimately associated with our faith. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Jews ask for signs, Greeks desire wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified." And just a few lines later he wrote, "I had no intention of knowing anything among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" [1 Cor. 1:22, 23; 2:2].

Crucifixion is so intimately associated with Jesus, so intimately associated with our faith. That's also what Christians have been saying for centuries with the symbols they've chosen to use in their worship facilities and at home. When people think "Christian," what's the first symbol they think of? A cross, right? The symbol of crucifixion. Christians put it on their altars, set it up in their sanctuaries, hang it on their walls, hang it around their necks, pin it to their ties, make its sign in the invocation in the beginning of worship and in the blessing at the end. They make its sign on their babies when they're baptized, and Martin Luther even said that, to remind ourselves of our baptism, we should make the sign of the cross on ourselves every morning and every night.

All of this amazing when you stop to think about it, considering that no one is more dear to us than Jesus and very few things are more shameful than crucifixion.

Think of the person on earth most dear to you. For the sake of easy comparison to Jesus, let's make it the adult male on earth most dear to you. Imagine that you and this friend of yours are Jews living in Jerusalem, which is under the control of the Romans, around 30 AD. Your friend gets arrested and convicted of a serious crime. He is put on trial and sentenced to be crucified, and you are there to witness the whole ordeal. What are you going to witness your friend go through?

First, he is given a sound flogging by a soldier using a whip whose leather thongs are embedded with small pieces of bone and lead, while the other soldiers mock and taunt him. His back gets shredded.

Then, after his back has been shredded and his strength exhausted, the soldiers force him to carry the crossbeam of his cross on his shoulders as far as he can toward the place where he will be crucified. This crossbeam isn't a smooth piece of plastic paneled with imitation wood. It's a rough and large piece of lumber probably weighing between 75 and 125 lbs. As he begins the trek a soldier sticks a tablet tied to a piece of rope around his protruding neck, which states plainly for everyone who sees him what he's being crucified for.

They take him out to a hill called Skull Place. There the stake might already be erected in the ground. In that case they now strip him naked and nail his wrists to the crossbeam he's been carrying and then hoist him up by that beam, with him hanging there only by the radius bones in his wrist, and they fit him into place. Once the crossbeam is in place, they nail his feet to the stake, either separately, or one on top of the other in order to save on nails. If the stake is not

already erected in the ground, the soldiers fit the crossbeam into the stake on the ground, then lay him down on it and hold him in place while they nail his wrists and feet to it, then hoist the entire cross up into place with ropes.

The tablet that was hanging around his neck they now nail to the top of the stake above his head. If there's anything to support him at all, it might be an angled footrest, or it might be a small, uncomfortable wooden seat halfway up the cross for him to sit on. If you're thinking, "Wouldn't a seat make it easier on him?"—exactly. The point is to drag out his death.

Once he's in place the soldiers just sit around, divide up his clothes, make fun of him, and wait for him to die, which could happen in any number of ways.

He could die from shock due to blood loss. In that case you will watch your dear friend's skin slowly get paler and sweatier, his breathing rate and heart rate gradually get faster and faster, his mind get more anxious, restless, confused, and agitated—all until he simply loses it or passes out.

He could die from sepsis due to infection from any of the wounds on his wrists, feet, or back. Sepsis is when your entire body becomes swollen.

If your friend is healthy enough, he could survive everything else and painfully die after a couple days from dehydration. If he asked the soldiers for anything to drink, they will either refuse him or give him sour, acidic wine vinegar to drink from a dirty sponge—dirty, since the sponge is standard issue to the soldiers for use as toilet paper.

If there is no wooden seat and if his arms are nailed straight out at about a 90 degree angle from his body, he could die from asphyxiation. It will get more and more difficult for him to breathe as his chest muscles and lungs hyper-expand.

Or your friend might get lucky and the soldiers might have mercy on him and hasten his death by breaking his legs after a few hours or a day. In that case he will die through severe traumatic shock and fat blockage in his leg veins. Mind you, that's if he's lucky.

In the meantime you will watch your friend spend his time on the cross crying and weeping, utterly humiliated—his guilt and his body completely exposed to the world. If he has to relieve himself, he has to do it for all to see. And he not only has to endure his own physical and mental pain, but he also has to endure the pain of the criminals crucified next to him. What's worse than sobbing uncontrollably? Sobbing uncontrollably in a room full of people sobbing uncontrollably, not a one of whom has any word of comfort for you. That's what your friend has to go through.

And once he finally dies, unless you come to take him down and give him a proper burial, the soldiers will just leave him there to rot. Eventually they'll come back and knock his corpse off the cross and recycle the nails—wouldn't want them to go to waste!

Now if you saw your dear friend go through all that, my guess is that it wouldn't matter whether it was days, weeks, years, or decades later, a cross is the *last* symbol you would associate with yourself. You would never watch another crucifixion again, and anything even hinting of crucifixion you would keep as far away from yourself as possible. And if you ever did see a cross or accidentally hear someone refer to a cross, it would be all you could do to refrain from breaking down and bawling.

But when it comes to Jesus, our *dearest* friend, it's the exact opposite. We actually embrace and cherish the shame of his cross! And we use crosses as decorations! *Why?*

We do it, first of all, because we realize it should have been each one of us up there, not Jesus. And when I say it should have been each one of us up there, I'm not just saying that we all deserve to be executed by crucifixion.

Did you ever wonder why Jesus chose crucifixion? Obviously it was prophesied in the Scriptures, but it was prophesied because that's what Jesus himself chose from eternity. Why did he choose it? The Bible doesn't tell us why, but I'm going to hazard a guess. I think it's because, first, it involved the whole person, as we've been considering in this service, and so it was a fitting way for Jesus to pay for our sins, sins we have committed with our whole persons. Second, it was such a *long* and *excruciatingly* painful way to die (and by the way, the word *excruciating* comes from two Latin words, *ex cruce*, "from a cross"), and so by carefully considering his crucifixion, we get just a glimpse of the *eternal* and *infinitely more excruciating* pain he was suffering, the pain of hell.

As much as you might have winced while I was detailing crucifixion, that was a parlor game compared to this other pain. We see him suffering this other pain when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" To be forsaken by all of God's goodness and to be left with nothing but his wrath over sin—that is hell.

So when I say it should have been each one of us up there, I'm saying that each one of us should have had to endure hell, not Jesus. Because Jesus didn't actually do anything wrong. We see it even here in John. There's something missing from the Gospel text that shouldn't be missing at a crucifixion. There's no tablet around Jesus's neck stating what he did wrong, like the other two criminals presumably had. They didn't have one for Jesus at first, because they didn't have anything to write down. Pilate eventually had one prepared to fasten to the cross above Jesus's head, but the best he could come up with was "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."

Isn't that amazing? After countless meetings and plots by the Pharisees and Sadducees and experts in the law, after paying or otherwise bribing numerous false witnesses to come forward, after wrangling with Pontius Pilate all night, they didn't even have something horrible to write on the tablet that they could make up. All that could be written was the truth: "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Even when the Jews complained about what Pilate had written, they didn't say that something like "murderer," "rebel," or "adulterer" should be written in its place. No, just, "Write that he *claimed* to be the King of the Jews." Ooh, what a bad, bad Jesus!

Here was a man tempted in every way just as we are, yet remained without sin. Here was a man who submitted to his parents while he was living under their roof, even though he created them, and he always knew better than they did. Here was a man who submitted to the government except when he could not do so without sinning, even though he was the King of kings. Here was a man who never harmed a soul, but healed and helped even the most unworthy and most disgusting people. Here was a man who was followed and befriended by countless women who had the highest regard for him, and there's not even a rumor or suspicion of any inappropriate conduct. Here was a man who respected the property of others, even though he really had a right to it all. Here was a man who spoke well of others whenever he could, even though he knew their hearts. Here was a man who was in the synagogue Saturday after Saturday, even though if there were anyone who could say he didn't need to go to church or that he didn't get anything out of it, it was he. (And mind you, he's the *only* one who could say that.) Here was a man who always submitted to God the Father's will, even when it meant being crucified, and

did so willingly. Here was a man who, even as he hung on the cross, had nothing but words of patience, love, and forgiveness.

Not us. What if God, the Judge of all, exercised his right to draw up a tablet to hang around our neck? Which of the Ten Commandments would you not want him to touch? Which of your years on earth would you beg him not to look into? Not that that would save us. God has a running tablet not only of every wrong deed and word, but of every wrong thought and attitude.

And if you want proof that these abound inside of us, just put yourself in Jesus's shoes. Actually, you don't even need to imagine yourself crucified. How do you act when you don't get the toy you want? the car you want? How do you act when you hit your hand or bump your head? The other morning my wife came in to hand Shaylah to me while I was sitting at the dinner table, and I backed away from the table too fast and brought down one of the oak legs of my chair on my right pinkie toe. The pain was incredible, and my first flash of a thought? I was trying to think of how it could be my wife's fault so that I could blame her for my pain. Utterly ridiculous! How do you act when you lose your job? How do you act when you get sick? How much selfish whining and complaining and crying and weeping we do, even though what we deserve is infinitely worse than crucifixion!

Yes, it should have been us. But it's not. It's Jesus.

And that's the second reason we cherish the cross, not just because it *should have been* us, but because it's *not* us and *never will be*.

Because even though Jesus didn't have a tablet hanging around his neck, and even though the tablet on his cross didn't say anything bad, God did have a tablet for him. And on that tablet was written all of your sins and all of my sins. Not one was omitted.

But precisely in so doing, God made it so that they weren't your sins or mine anymore. He made it so that they were all Jesus's sins. In fact, Paul tells us that God made Jesus to be sin itself for us [2 Cor. 5:21]. So when Jesus was crucified and suffered hell for our sins, that means that all our sins were paid for. There is not a single sin left in your life or mine that has not been paid for already by Jesus. The cross for Jesus means no hell for us. The cross of Jesus means death can do its worst to us, but it can't actually make us die. After all, death is reserved for sinners, and since Jesus took our sins for us, we aren't sinners anymore. In Christ crucified, we are holy and righteous.

So we embrace the cross. There's an early example of carved graffiti that was discovered in 1857 and dates roughly to between 100 and 200 AD. That means it might have been carved less than a century after Jesus was crucified. You can look it up for yourself; it's called the Alexamenos graffiti [see also next page]. It depicts a Roman soldier or guard named Alexamenos. Alexamenos is looking at a man nailed to a cross, only the man has a donkey's head. The inscription reads: "This is Alexamenos worshipping God."

The "artist" mean to insult and embarrass Alexamenos. Do you think it would have worked, if Alexamenos knew about it? If you were Alexamenos, would it embarrass you? Not one bit, does it! You kind of wish Alexamenos was here so that we could give him a round of applause or a hug or a handshake or a proud slap on the back. That graffiti artist had no idea. That's not a donkey on the cross. That *is* God. That is *the* God. That's Christ crucified, crucified

and suffering hell for my sins. That should have been me suffering hell for them. But it isn't, and it never will be.

We believe in Christ crucified. Because we also believe what we will celebrate this Sunday, saying we believe in Christ crucified is the same as saying that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

