

Why is the Cross the Centre of Our Faith? (Who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died he descended to hell)

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[0 : 00] He takes delight. So if you have your Bibles open at Matthew chapter 27, we come to that section of the Creed where we confess Jesus who suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified, died, and was buried, He descended into hell.

We'll begin with a basic question. Why is the cross the center of our faith? Unique to Christianity, other religions have a moral code, the significance of a holy place, perhaps a particular teacher or prophet, but for Christianity, we have the old rugged cross.

I think about how different things would have been, you know, if Paul had resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ, the wise teacher, or Jesus Christ, the worker of great miracles of mercy, or Jesus Christ and His miraculous and humble birth.

But instead, remember Paul's words, I resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Last week was the miracle of the incarnation.

This week is the reason for the incarnation. The reason Jesus came was to die. His suffering and death explain His coming.

[1 : 48] And the Creed can help us to reflect on why the cross is and must always be central to our faith, even when it remains a stumbling block and folly to people in the 21st century just as much as it was in the 1st century.

To think again about that hymn, The Old Rugged Cross. It speaks of the cross as an emblem, a badge, a marker of suffering and shame. We have read Isaiah 53 and sung Psalm 22, and that resonates, doesn't it?

But how can we glory in that? Why do we call it good news? Why do we call it good news when, for so many people, it is a mark of derision?

Up on the screen there, there's some ancient 2nd century graffiti, Roman graffiti. It's hard to make out the details. It's called, Alexa Menos Worships His God.

And what we have there from the 2nd century is a very basic cross with a human figure, but with a donkey's head.

[3 : 06] That's what they thought of the God that Alexa Menos worshipped. That was the 2nd century, 21st century, two days ago, a post on Twitter, X, whatever you call it, however you slice it, the post said, evangelical Christianity is un-earned.

It's unreformable because it believes child sacrifice saved the world. So there's still that mockery, that derision, that just disgust and distaste towards the cross.

How can we celebrate it as an act of love and a demonstration of grace? We're going to stand together at the foot of the cross in Matthew 27 with a hope and a prayer that for those of us who are believers, it will strengthen our faith.

And perhaps it will give answers when those questions come, when those challenges come. Some different themes for us to pursue this evening briefly. The first is the theme of suffering and solution. But before we get into our text, there was a couple of times where the disciples found themselves asking a question of Jesus, Lord, don't you care?

[4 : 24] We recognize that. Fearful Christians. Perhaps we have some of those same thoughts and questions with the circumstances that come. We know that trouble and suffering, like waves, can crash and can rock us.

Why is it good news that Jesus suffered? It's going to help us to answer the question. We're going to think about Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate, who's mentioned in our creed.

Why is he in our creed? He's in our creed because it reminds us that Jesus' suffering and death is history and not myth. The way that Matthew reports it makes it clear that these are historical events. So we read about in verse 11 that Pilate is the governor. We learn in verse 15 about the governor's custom to release a prisoner.

We find in verse 19 Pilate sitting on the judge's seat. This is history and not myth. But Pontius Pilate and his actions in the suffering and death of Jesus also speak to us of that conspiracy.

[5 : 35] It's called a conspiracy of evil where we find two normally enemies, Jews and Romans, coming together to have Jesus executed.

The Jewish leaders know that they want Jesus condemned as a blasphemer, claiming to be God, and they decided he wasn't. He was. And so they take him to the Roman authorities.

And we see them whipping up the crowd in verse 20. The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. They pressurize Pilate, who can't find that Jesus has done anything wrong, nothing worthy of death.

But in the end, he caves to public pressure. And so Pilate is responsible in part for the greatest injustice in human history.

But Pilate also has a part to play in a conversation that Matthew doesn't record, but John does.

[6 : 44] Speaking to a greater authority. The world of Jesus' day, Rome was the great authority on earth. But Jesus, when he was being tried by Pilate, could turn to him and say, You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.

Jesus' point is clear. God the Father is directing events and not Pilate. This is God's plan for his suffering servant.

As we read in Isaiah 53 verse 10, It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. So the suffering of Christ is at the same time a fact of history and a great injustice and an act that accomplishes the plan and purpose of God for salvation.

Why is it good news that Jesus suffered? Think about suffering as one of the universal human problems.

We turn on our news. We read our histories. We just look into our own family stories. And we recognize suffering on every page.

[7 : 58] And what the Bible does for us is it traces suffering back to root cause. And reminds us that suffering springs from human sin.

Human rebellion from God. There in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve turned their back on God, everything begins to unravel. We have this fall into sin and suffering that comes.

So that's the great human problem. And we have the gospel. We have the suffering Son of God as God's great solution.

That by God's grace, this principle was established of the sacrifice of a substitute to atone for sin. So when Adam and Eve were feeling their sense of guilt and shame and were trying to hide from God and they tried their own covering which didn't work, God made a sacrifice and covered them with animal clothing.

[9 : 03] The Old Testament sacrificial system was built on this reality. God, by His grace, has made a way for sin to be dealt with by way of a substitute.

And that climax is in the sending of Jesus, who John the Baptist recognizes as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And so when we come to the cross, what we find is Jesus, the Son of God, solving the problem of sin and the suffering it brings by taking it into Himself.

In the Old Testament, we have that picture of the cup of God's wrath. God's just anger against sin and unrighteousness.

And we have this amazing grace in that Jesus is the one who takes the wrath of God, who drinks that cup down to the dregs, so that when our faith is in Jesus, there is no judgment left for us.

[10 : 14] That in His sacrifice is our forgiveness, is our salvation. We return to our question, Lord, don't you care?

Where do we go with that? We go to the cross. When we go to the cross, we know that God absolutely does care about suffering, and He does care about sin, and God demonstrates His love for us in this.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So the cross speaks to us of sin and suffering and God's solution.

Another theme, another contrast to think about is that of abandoned and welcomed. One effect of our own experience of suffering is that we can often feel forgotten.

We can feel abandoned, perhaps even by God. We can find it hard to see past our circumstances. They can loom so large on our horizon.

[11 : 23] It's like we can't see beyond them, and all we have is darkness. I think part of the beauty of the Psalms is that they give voice to our distresses when they come.

Whether that's grief or fear or loneliness or sorrow or doubt or confusion, we find them there. And they give us words to bring to our God.

It's amazing, isn't it? That's true in Jesus' experience also. In His experience of grief on the cross, He turns to Psalm 22.

Let's read again, verse 45. Remember in the Exodus story, the darkness representing the plague of God's judgment.

Well, now here, the judgment is falling on Jesus, the sinless Son of God. Here is His moment of greatest suffering as He is loaded up with sin and experiencing its penalty.

[12 : 36] And as He looks for His Father, He finds no comfort. And so He cries this prayer of Psalm 22, this prayer of the righteous sufferer.

Because here, in these moments, as Jesus becomes the sin-bearer of the world, He is treated by His Father as if Jesus were the worst sinner who ever lived.

The Son of God. We find Him the one who enjoyed unbroken, eternal, loving fellowship with His Father. Now as the God-man, just as in Gethsemane, now here at Calvary, He loses that sense of the sunshine of God's love.

And all He experiences is darkness. As the dark storm clouds of God's judgment break over Him, He loses that sense of the light of His Father's love.

And the question we need to ask is why? And we need to ask why is His being forsaken good news for us? How can this darkness bring us light?

[13 : 54] Again, let's go back to Isaiah 53. Let me read again Isaiah 53 and verse 4 and 5. Surely, He took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we consider Him punished by God, stricken by Him and afflicted.

But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

There's the good news. It's Jesus taking my penalty, my sin, my guilt, my condemnation as a perfect, willing, loving substitute.

And the outcome of that, Peter records it for us, Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust.

Why? To bring you to God. To bring you to God. There's the light. Jesus feels abandoned so that by faith in Him we might be eternally welcomed.

[15 : 14] Any sense that we have of feeling forgotten or abandoned by God, it is only temporary, and there's always a greater truth and reality that we are loved by God in Christ.

We belong to Him. We will never be apart from Him. Jesus is abandoned, forsaken, so that we can enjoy a true eternal home with a loving Father, and all because of His grace.

Here's another theme to consider at the foot of the cross. It's the contrast, again, between curse and blessing. Again, to think widely about our experience and humanity's experience of suffering.

Typically, if we think about God at all, suffering will do one of two things to us. It will either drive us away from God in bitterness and resentment. How did you allow this to happen to me?

Or it will drive us towards God. Where else can we go? Independence as children looking for mercy. Perhaps we remember a number of years ago now when one of the Amish communities in America shocked the world.

[16 : 36] There was that awful scene where a gunman entered their community and killed so many innocent people, and yet their response was to forgive and to shield and to support the family of the gunman and to choose love over hate.

And the media was so full of questions. How could they do that? Why would they do that? The answer lies in the cross and the gospel.

Lies in a Jesus who loves His enemies. And Jesus who takes God's curse to give us God's blessing and to understand that is where the power to love and forgive comes from.

Matthew recognizes the most Jewish gospel, and so we understand that the people he writes to as he writes about the cross, they know their Old Testament.

And they know one verse in particular from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 21, 23, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. And as Matthew records the details of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, they show us that Jesus stands, hangs under God's covenant curse.

[18 : 03] As our representative and as our substitute, we see Jesus treated as if He had broken the law, as if He had been unfaithful within the covenant.

He's doing that for a lawbreaker. Verse 33, Jesus is crucified at a place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull.

Located outside the city, Jesus is killed outside the camp. This is an unclean place. Jesus is treated as an unclean one.

He's under the curse of the covenant. Verse 38, two rebels were crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left.

Jesus is quite literally in the midst, in the place of sinners. Shame, suffering, curse, all represented here.

[19 : 20] And as He hangs, we hear and we see Him despised by all. Verse 39, the people passing by, the crowds, they hurled insults at Him.

In verse 41, the religious leaders, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders mocked Him. Even the other criminals, the rebels who were crucified with Him, also heaped insults on Him. He saved others He can't save Himself. They don't understand God's way. The only way Jesus can save others is by not saving Himself. Now, here is God's Son.

Here is God's promised Savior. And now He is dying in shame and humiliation, standing under God's curse. Why is this our symbol?

Why is the cross good news? We turn to Galatians 3.13, and we find an answer there. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

[20 : 33] What Paul celebrates is the truth that what Jesus experiences on the cross should be the experience of us all.

We should know the darkness descend. We should know the punishment of God. Because we have all broken God's law.

But by God's grace and through faith in Jesus, our substitute, our Savior, that won't be our experience. In fact, we will have the exact opposite experience because we will enjoy blessing, treated as if we had never broken any of God's laws, as Jesus' righteousness is credited to us.

One way we see this is that as Luke has his record of what happens on the cross in Luke 23, from verse 40 to 43, we discover that sometime after this, the two criminals who had been hurling insults at Jesus, one of them has a change of heart.

Was it the way Jesus prayed? Was it the way he refused to retaliate? We don't know. But at some point, he recognizes Jesus as a king with a kingdom, and he says, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

[21 : 51] And Jesus responds, today, paradise. Because Jesus, in dying, took that man's curse so he could give him God's blessing.

That's what Jesus would do for each one of us when our faith is in him. One last theme. It's the theme of punishment and reward.

Again, to think about the suffering of Christ and how it can help us, it can help us to answer some of the great fears that we experience, great fears that others experience. What will happen when we die?

What will the verdict be on my life if we're sensitive and reflective? Perhaps there can be worry and concern. This perhaps takes us to the difficult phrase within the creed.

He descended into hell. Maybe you asked yourself the question, why is that in our creed? Why do we speak like that? Well, I hope we'll see why it has its place and why it can give comfort.

[23 : 02] There's two ways that people have thought about that. At first, originally, the idea of descending into hell was the idea of descent to Hades. Hades, the place of death, the place of separation of body and soul.

The creed is reminding us Jesus really went there. As the suffering servant, he really died to become our Savior.

But another way that people have found it helpful to reflect upon this imagery is to think about Jesus' spiritual descent. You know, Philippians 2 speaks about the humility, the humiliation of the Lord Jesus, leaving the glory of heaven to become one of us, ultimately to go to the cross for us. And there, as Jesus humbles himself to become the suffering servant, to die on the cross, Jesus experiences hell in concentrated form.

If you remember when we looked at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, story formed but revealed realities about what hell is, a place of agony, a place of punishment, a place of separation. [24 : 24] Jesus went there. Jesus experienced all of those dimensions of suffering there on the cross. We know that Jesus didn't literally go to hell.

He could say to the man, the thief on the cross today, he'll be with me in paradise. He said to his father, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. But this was a real spiritual descent to experience the agonies of hell for us.

Why is this part of the faith that we confess? Yes. Again, think about Paul's reminder to us, the wages of sin is death.

Jesus is taking the wages of sin for his people. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A great exchange. We see something of that here. Matthew 27, verse 51. What's happening? At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

[25 : 38] That great curtain in the garden, that no entry sign to the Holy of Holies. Now the way of access to God is open to us all through the Lord Jesus, by faith in him.

And that wasn't all that was torn open. In verse 52, the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who died were raised to life. The promise of resurrection life comes because the Jesus who died will be risen again.

Think about the details of his burial also. He dies as if he were a common criminal. But that's not how he's buried.

We discover a rich man, Joseph, come to take his body and to place it in his own tomb. He is buried with honor.

And again, that little detail was recorded in Isaiah 53. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death. Jesus' burial with honor, I think, is the first hint of his great exaltation.

[26 : 56] Death is not the end. We'll get there next week when we think about the resurrection. But this makes Christ our hope in life and in death. Makes it good news. Jesus really went to death and he came out the other side.

That's why we need to be united to him. Someone has used the image of a sewing needle passing through a cloth.

And as the needle goes through, so too does the thread. Where the needle goes, the thread goes too. If we are united to the Lord Jesus where he has gone, we will follow.

We too will be taken through the place of death and brought home to glory. And even now, we can reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive in Christ.

And again, to just remember that great exchange, Jesus really experienced the agonies of hell so that he could give you and I the joys of his heaven.

[28 : 00] Trusting in him, we can live without being overwhelmed by the fear of death because we rest in the victory of the Lord Jesus over death for us.

Do we see why the cross must always be the center? When the cross offends some and confuses others, to the believers, we say, to us who are being saved, it's the power of God.

Three words to take away. The first word is grace. Christianity is uniquely and unashamedly a rescue religion.

We celebrate God's initiative in sending his Son in a seeking and finding Savior in salvation through a substitute. And because of grace, we can rest.

Not bearing the burden of trying to save ourselves, not needing to carry the burden of guilt and shame because Jesus at the cross bore the burden, paid the penalty in full.

[29 : 16] Because we deserve it, but because of sheer, amazing grace. we think of the cross, we think of forgiveness. The cross is a decisive moment, a moment of full and complete forgiveness for those who are trusting in Christ and united to him.

It's by faith in Jesus we know that we can stand before God and not be condemned, but rather be received into his kingdom.

And that gives us freedom. We got the freedom from the ups and downs that come when we're trying to prove ourselves or trying to base our confidence in how we're getting on in the Christian life rather than leaning on Christ.

We can have freedom by clinging to him. We also have freedom to be honest, to be honest about our sin, to honestly confess, because we know there is forgiveness at the cross.

And there's also the freedom to forgive others. Forgiven people forgive others. And the last word is love. It was Jesus who said, greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

[30 : 42] the cross is the greatest act of self-sacrificial, self-giving love. And not even at that stage for friends, Jesus is turning enemies into friends by his work on the cross.

When we live under the shadow of the cross, we have that assurance that God is eternally for us in love.

so we can testify with Paul at the end of Romans chapter 8. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Think of the suffering that we experience. Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And that love that we receive at the cross, that becomes the fuel that drives the engine of faith. It fuels our worship. We worship God for the cross of Christ as we have done this evening.

[31 : 50] We're ready to obey and to serve and to suffer for the sake of Christ Jesus, the one who loved me and gave himself for me. So truly the cross is the center.

The cross really does change everything. Let's pray briefly.