

Save Yourself!

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[0 : 00] Please be seated and let's pray together. Lord Jesus, as Christians we have sinned in robbing the cross of its shame and anguish and agony.

We so domesticated the cross that we may have lost the sense of excruciating pain that you endured and the length to which you went to reconcile us to God.

So please change us this morning. Confront us with the agony of the cross, I pray for Jesus' sake. Amen. Imagine with me.

It's the beginning. The earth is formless, void, empty. Darkness covers the face of the deep. All is silent, blank, vacuous, lifeless. Then suddenly a wind of God sweeps over the face of the waters.

[1 : 26] It's the genesis, the beginning. But it's no beginning for the Son of God. A ransomed murderer would later write, He is the image of the invisible God.

The firstborn over all creation. For by Him, all things were created. Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities.

All things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things. And in Him, all things hold together. In eternity past, the Son lives in constant, loving communion with the persons of the Trinity.

One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Think of it. Eternity past. In utterly self-sufficient, infinitely limitless relational perfection.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit lack nothing. They glory in each other's presence. Glory and honour and power belong to them and them only.

[2 : 49] Glory and glory in each other's presence.

It's a hill that will be branded the place of the skull. It's a hill that He, the very Son of God, will climb on His dread path to death.

Before the foundation of the world, the glorious Son of God is also the foredoomed Lamb that was slain. It's now Friday morning in the Jewish month of Nisan.

Around the year AD 30. Three criminals lay beaten and bleeding on the floor of a crude jail cell in Jerusalem. Insurgents and rebels.

They had been members of a Jewish uprising against the Roman Empire. The leader of the three, a notorious villain, is especially broken in body and spirit.

[4 : 11] To the prisoners, Passover seems an apt time to break free of the oppression of Gentile rule. As in the days of Moses, the Jews would unchackle themselves from the chains of their oppressors.

But the rebellion had failed. Quashed by Pilate and the might of the Roman guard. Now the prisoners stir as the light of dawn seeps through the cracks in their cell.

Outside the collective voice of a mob can be heard. Crucify Him. And let His blood be on us and our children. Suddenly the jail door is flung open.

The time for the three to die as treasonous, treacherous traitors has come. The time for the three to die as treasonous traitors has come.

The time for the onslaught. But wait. Something is different here. The soldiers stride straight to the lead prisoner and roughly drag him to his feet.

[5 : 46] Barabbas, for that's his name, is led out from their sight. Then a roar erupts in the gathered mob. They're shouting his name and applauding him.

Barabbas is free. Jesus' fate is sealed now. Barabbas. In a farcical act of non-justice, the Prince of Peace is its substituted for the notorious guerrilla terrorist.

Freshly scourged and beaten, the fainting, staggering Messiah is forced to shoulder a coarse beam of timber, about 20 kilograms heavy, on his lacerated back.

Flayed flesh and exposed shoulder blade, backbone and sinew rubs on the rough hewn wood, compounding the agony. Even his internal organs have been barbarised by the metal shards and sheep bones that are expertly attached to every good Roman scourge's whip.

Jesus winces and gasps. When will it end? The son of man knows the worst is yet to come.

[7 : 02] It's the third hour now, 9am. The sun is shining brightly on the hill, the place of the skull. It's the hill that the Son of God has eyed for time immemorial.

It's the hill of sacrifice. In a Herculean effort, Jesus has single-handedly carried the crossbar as far as the city gates.

Many men would have died as a result of the flogging alone. But perhaps Jesus' motivation spurs him on. The hour set in the annals of time has arrived. He will meet his gruesome destiny.

But eventually he can no longer bear the tool of torture that will serve to kill him. He collapses.

The beam falls hard on his broken and bloodied back. He stays down this time. In the crowd of people making their way into Jerusalem from the countryside, Simon of Cyrene, an old Greek settlement on the coast of North Africa, stands to watch his fellow Jews struggling under the weight of a Roman crossbar.

[8 : 17] With the God-man unable to carry on his death march, Simon is forced to carry the cross to the place of execution, the place of the skull. The agony continues.

Soldiers, mortal men created by the brutalised God incarnate, start to heap insults on the one who created them.

Some offer him something to drink, sneering at the practical joke. Jesus, parched beyond belief, grabs the cup and begins to drink it deeply, only to cast it away after a mouthful.

The contents is undrinkable, perhaps even poisonous. Wine mixed with bitter gall. Having had their fun, the soldiers set apart their repugnant task.

Jesus is grabbed, stripped of all his clothing and thrown to the ground. Iron spikes, five to seven inches long, are then driven through his wrists and into the timber, crushing the median nerve that runs to the hand.

[9 : 25] A torrent of pain floods through his broken body. Jesus screams in agony. The pain is beyond words to describe.

It's utterly excruciating. Excruciating. That word literally means out of the cross.

Think about that. We needed to invent a new word, because nothing in our language was adequate to describe the intense, fierce, overwhelming pain and anguish caused as nails are driven into hands and feet.

Still reeling in pain, Jesus is hoisted up and the crossbar is attached to the vertical beam. Feet are nailed. More nerves are crushed.

Blood flows. Screams issue from the mouth of the suffering servant. Now hanging from the cross, both Jesus' shoulders are dislocated as his own weight pulls hard on his outstretched arms.

[10 : 40] Pain compounded. Agony multiplied. Despair maximised. As Jesus hangs, he begins a slow, agonising march to asphyxiation.

Muscles straining, lungs empty, body broken. Three long hours will pass before death takes him. Meanwhile, the soldiers gamble over his clothes and so unwittingly fulfil the Old Testament prophecy of Psalm 22, 18.

They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. Back within the city walls, Pilate sits in the cool recesses of the Praetorium and gloats to his diplomatic advisers about the charge he ordered to have inscribed in Hebrew, Greek and Latin on Jesus' cross.

King of the Jews, it read. Scoffing, he tells his fellow Romans how gloriously offensive it will be to their Jewish subjects to see such a statement ascribed to a dying man.

To the Jews, their king would be an all-conquering political hero who would crush the ruling Roman Empire and liberate the Jewish nation. Pilate laughs as he pictures Jesus, the king of the Jews, slowly dying as a messianic pretender.

[12 : 20] Meanwhile, the hard-hearted mob continues to taunt the dying man as he gasps for breath. You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself.

If you are the son of God, come down off the cross. Blind guides mock him also. He saved others. He cannot save himself.

He is the king of Israel. Let him come down from the cross now and we will believe in him. The pair of failed rebels, now crucified, are hoisted up beside him and join in the vilification.

And oh, that he would obey them. Oh, that he would obey them. That he would come down off that cross. That he would command the legions of waiting angels to unpin his hands and his feet.

That he would heal himself of the devastating wounds. That he would deliver himself from the shame and the torment and the anguish. That he would come down and annihilate every enemy that scoffed, every soldier that mocked.

[13 : 32] But no. He did say that he would destroy the temple only to rebuild it in three days.

But the temple he spoke of wasn't a mere building of stone and mortar. It wasn't a mere representation of God's presence on earth. death. No.

It was his own body that he spoke of. God's actual presence with us that would be destroyed. And so if the temple of Jesus' body was to be destroyed and rebuilt in three days, then no escape from the cross was possible.

Jesus stayed put for the sake of his enemies. He endured the most excruciating death for the sake of God-hating sinners. He gasped and sputtered and breathed his last shallow breath so that you could be saved from the same spiritual fate.

700 years before, a man of God named Isaiah prophesied. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

[14 : 59] Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

Beloved Christians, do you ever take the grace of God for granted? have you ever discounted the real price of your redemption?

Are you prone to downplay the depth of Christ's suffering? Will you go on neglecting to give due honour to your suffering servant king?

five days from now we will mark Good Friday. We will remember Jesus' act of substitution and sacrifice.

[16 : 20] We will reflect on his shameful trial, his brutal beatings and his agonising death. may we truly grasp the depth of God's love for us and the extent to which he went to reconcile us to himself.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I pray that the Holy Spirit would convict every Christian in this room right now.

You convict us of our failure to be confronted by the cross, our guilt in domesticating the cross, our failure to see the depth to which you would go to reconcile your enemies to yourself.

Lord, while we are yet sinners, you died for us. While we are still your enemies, you are punished for us. So I pray that we would sit and soak very uneasily in the anguish and the pain and the shame and the excruciating agony that you endured for our sake.

Save us from looking too quickly ahead to the glory of the resurrection on Sunday. Help us to be confronted right now with the cross.

[18 : 11] I pray for Jesus' glory. Amen. Amen.