

The Strange Attraction of the Cross

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[0 : 00] spread throughout the ancient world, Christians were consistently mocked. And they were mocked in particular for worshipping a crucified man. The earliest known visual depiction of Jesus on the cross is not a piece of Christian artwork. It's a crude piece of graffiti from about 200 AD in the city of Rome. To the left is a man raising his hand in worship or prayer. To his right is a man hanging from a cross depicted with the head of a donkey. The inscription says, Alex Aminos worships his God.

It's a cartoon scrawled on a wall ridiculing Christians and the cross. Lucian, a second-century writer called the early Christians misguided creatures. They worship a man to this day, the distinguished personality who introduced their novel rites and was crucified on that account.

They worship the crucified sage and live after his laws. Even in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul acknowledged that the message of the cross of Jesus was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. In other words, every culture in one way or another finds the cross of Jesus to be offensive, distasteful, or even ridiculous. And yet today, over two billion people throughout the world profess Christianity. And the cross is the most prominent and universally recognized symbol of the Christian faith. And this weekend, Christians throughout the world gather to declare that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. How and why did that ever happen?

Tim Keller once observed that every other founder of a major religion died in peace, old, and successful. Moses lived over 100 years, having brought the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to the edge of the Promised Land. The Buddha lived 80. Having achieved enlightenment, he died surrounded by his disciples.

Muhammad lived into his 60s. He died in his home, having united Arabia into one Islamic kingdom. Jesus died at age 33. He was betrayed, abandoned, mocked, beaten, and finally crucified.

[2 : 50] Why would anyone look at this man and say, he's the one I want to follow? That's the faith for me. Especially when Jesus had also said, if anyone wants to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his own cross and follow after me. What was and still is so strangely attractive about this crucified man? That's the question I want to address tonight.

Tonight we've read Luke's account of how Jesus' life ended. Earlier in the part before we read, Jesus was betrayed by one of his followers, repeatedly denied by another.

We read of his trial before Jewish leaders and before Roman authorities. And despite two official not guilty verdicts, he was sentenced to death and handed over to a hostile crowd.

He was led outside the gate of the city to a place called the skull. And Luke simply says in verse 33, there they crucified him.

He doesn't give us the gory details. But everyone in the ancient world knew that crucifixion was both excruciatingly painful and exceedingly shameful.

[4 : 22] I think we often think about how painful it would have been for Jesus. If you even try to hold your arms out for 10 minutes straight, you start to feel it.

How painful it would have been to have nails driven through his wrists and his feet, to be holding himself up by his arms for six hours, gasping for every breath after having been beaten to a pulp and weakened by the loss of blood.

And that's all true. But in the ancient world, it was the shame of crucifixion that distinguished it even more than the pain. Pain and suffering were everywhere and mostly unavoidable in the ancient world.

But crucifixion was the most humiliating and imaginable. Crucifixion was reserved for non-citizens of the Roman Empire, for slaves, for violent criminals, and for prisoners of war.

The victim would be stripped naked, except perhaps for a loincloth, suspended just above eye level of a crowd, poked and prodded, mocked and jeered.

[5 : 42] Crucifixion was a public spectacle. The Roman authorities intentionally located crucifixions just outside the main gate of a city, in a most heavily trafficked area, because everyone knew it wasn't really justice in any real sense of the word.

What it was, was a deterrent. To remind everyone who was in charge, and to warn anyone who wanted to follow a similar path. That's how Jesus' life ended.

In humiliation, in pain, and in disgrace. In Luke's narrative of the crucifixion, Luke shows us how several different people reacted and responded to Jesus on the cross.

If you look in verses 35 to 39, there are three groups of people who all cast their verdict on Jesus. First, in verse 35, we see the ones he calls the rulers, that is, the Jewish authorities.

They scoffed at him. He saved others. Let him save himself, if he really is the Christ of God, his chosen one.

[7 : 12] Interestingly, the Jewish leaders did acknowledge Jesus' power. He saved others. Now, that word saved can mean delivered, healed, or made whole.

Most likely, they were referring to Jesus' well-known works of healing people from sicknesses and delivering them from evil spirits. They acknowledged Jesus' power.

The second group of people is the Roman soldiers, the executioners who mocked him. In verse 34, they gamble for his clothing. Verse 36, one of them pretends to be a cupbearer, offering this king cheap, sour wine.

They were the ones who posted the inscription in verse 38. The inscription above the cross, which declared the legal charge against the one being crucified.

It was treason, for he had claimed to be a king. And so, they wrote, the king of the Jews. And they mocked him. If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

[8 : 34] Finally, in fiercest of all, in verse 39, one of the criminals hanging there next to him railed at him. Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us.

Rescue us all now. Then I'll believe in you. The taunting went from bad to worse. And in each case, the refrain was, save yourself.

Now, if you've read the whole Gospel of Luke, you might recognize the echo of another voice that spoke to Jesus three times. Back in the desert. If you really are the Son of God, why don't you take an easier way?

And yet, all of these voices were operating on a very common human assumption. Their assumption was this. If Jesus really was the king of Israel, if he really was God's anointed king, if he really was God's chosen servant, his life should be ending in honor and triumph rather than in shame and defeat.

Now, we might not want to identify ourselves with the scoffers and the mockers and the blasphemer, but their working assumption is a very widespread human assumption that appears throughout the world and even in many religions.

[10 : 24] You could call it the law of karma. Whatever you do, for good or for evil, it'll come back to you someday. Or you could put it this way.

God preserves the honor of his faithful servants and prophets. That's what God should do, right? Or you could say, because I'm a good person, God should make me happy.

However we put it, that's how we usually think God should run the world. God should run the world if he's really good and if he's really in charge.

He should make us happy if we're good. He should deal well with his faithful servants. And he should pay us back.

He should... You get what you give. And when the world doesn't seem to work according to that principle, that's when we often question the character or the reality or the active involvement of God in the world in which we live.

[11 : 45] Nobody in the ancient world expected God's chosen one, God's righteous servant, God's anointed king, his own son, to be brutally tortured and humiliated and killed and strung up on a cross.

No one expected it. And so most people looked at Jesus being crucified and concluded that he was not any of those things.

There's only one person in Luke's narrative who presents a dissenting voice in favor of Jesus.

Now, there are others in the story who express sympathy for or even, we could say, solidarity with Jesus. There's Simon of Cyrene in the posture of a true disciple carrying the cross behind Jesus in verse 26.

There's the women of Jerusalem who sympathetically mourn for him in verse 27. There's the people who simply stand there watching in verse 35.

[13:08] And later on, after Jesus dies, in verse 47, a Roman centurion will praise God and declare that Jesus was truly a righteous man. But while Jesus is hanging there on the cross, there's only one person in Luke's narrative that says anything positive about him.

It's the second criminal hanging next to him on a cross. Luke doesn't tell us much about these two criminals.

We don't know their names. We don't know their backgrounds. We don't know the details of their crimes. They seem to have had no prior acquaintance with Jesus.

Luke refers to them simply as criminals. The word could also be translated evildoers, bad characters. The gospel of Mark calls them robbers, indicating that their crimes involved violence. The same word was used for revolutionaries like Barabbas who had led violent uprisings. Mark also tells us that those who were crucified with him also reviled him in Mark 15, 32.

[14:30] In other words, at the start of the day, both criminals were hostile to Jesus on both sides of him. But somehow, in the course of the day, one of them switched sides.

Now, perhaps the second criminal was troubled by the bitterness and irrationality of the first criminal's attack on Jesus. verse 40 says he rebuked him.

In other words, he told him off. He might have used some choice words that Luke perhaps may or may not have preserved exactly. Don't you fear God at all?

Don't you realize we deserve what we're getting here? We both know we've done some pretty bad things. how can you demand that he rescue himself and us?

You've gone way too far. But he doesn't just tell off his fellow criminal. He defends Jesus.

[15:48] He says, this man has done nothing wrong. And then finally he makes a simple plea. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

What was so strangely attractive about Jesus to this crucified criminal? What made him switch sides?

Like most of the biblical authors, Luke very rarely makes explicit statements about people's motives and inner thoughts.

But he gives us one strong hint in verse 34. There they crucified him and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left, and Jesus said, Father, forgive them.

for they know not what they do. That's the one word of Jesus that the criminal most certainly heard.

[17:02] And it's a word that absolutely sets Jesus apart. It is unique, and it was completely unprecedented. Throughout history, many presidents and kings have extended pardons.

But almost always, they pardon people who have shown loyalty to them, or who have many powerful and persistent advocates, or who they judge to have received unfairly harsh sentences for relatively minor crimes, or people who've spent most of their lives in jail, and now they're very old and relatively and probably harmless.

many people have faced unjust trials and have even faced death with calmness.

You might think of Socrates in Greece who faced his death with relative calmness and stoicism.

but he said nothing about the jury that had convicted him. Even the greatest heroes of the faith before Jesus did not pray that their enemies would be pardoned.

[18:24] Probably the most famous group of martyrs at the time of Jesus were the Maccabean martyrs. some Jewish men and women in the second century BC who had died for their faith under a brutal Roman tyrant.

They maintained their faith in God even to the point of death. But they also cried out for vengeance and threatened their persecutors with judgment.

Very understandably, King David even in Psalm 69 prayed that his betrayers be cursed, blotted out of the book of life and not listed with the righteous.

There's something even right about the desire for justice. I'm not saying that's a wrong thing. You find it throughout the Bible.

But no martyr before Jesus prayed that his tormentors would find forgiveness. Of course, those were the heroes of the faith, the martyrs.

[19 : 43] How many of us have cursed others in our hearts, told people to go to hell, cut people out of our lives with no possibility of future reconciliation for far less than Jesus endured?

There's a children's song that puts it very simply. It says this, it says, tell me, would you say what Jesus said if they did those mean things to you?

Sometimes children's songs can get right to the point. Would any of us spontaneously and freely pray such a prayer without having first seen and been deeply transformed by Jesus himself?

What great mercy! What marvelous patience! love! What unselfish love!

Who is this man? More concerned for his tormentors than for himself? No wonder the criminal concluded, this man has done nothing wrong.

[21 : 15] There's no one else like him. but there's one more thing that the criminal must have seen.

Not only Jesus' absolute uniqueness but also his amazing openness. Who was Jesus praying for in verse 34?

Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Was he praying for the soldiers? They're the ones who in the second half of the verse cast lots to divide his garments.

They're the ones who would have nailed him up on the cross. Was he praying for them, the execution squad who were simply doing their jobs and had no idea who he really was?

Or was he also praying for the religious leaders who also didn't recognize him for who he really was?

[22 : 26] But really Jesus' prayer in verse 34 cannot be limited to just one group of people. Charles Spurgeon said, I love this prayer prayer of Jesus because of the indistinctness of it.

Father, forgive them. He does not say, Father, forgive the soldiers who have nailed me here. He includes them. Neither does he say, Father, forgive sinners in ages to come who will sin against me, but he means them.

Father, forgive them. them. Now, into that pronoun them, I feel that I can crawl. It is like a chariot of mercy that has come down to earth into which a man may step and it shall bear him up to heaven.

Father, forgive them. the criminal heard that prayer. Perhaps he thought something like, if this Jesus is praying for mercy for his tormentors, perhaps he has mercy for me as well.

Jesus, he says, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

There's a similar prayer in Psalm 106, verse 4.

[24 : 10] The psalmist prays, Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people. Help me when you save them.

It's purely and simply a plea for mercy. with nothing else attached. The criminal doesn't boast of any personal merit, of any good works, of any moral achievements. He doesn't attempt to impress Jesus with his religious knowledge. He makes no claim to deserve anything good.

He only expresses simple trust in a bold prayer, Jesus, remember me with mercy when you finally become king. He looks at Jesus, the man who had saved others but wouldn't save himself, and he sees the one who was prophesied by the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years beforehand.

Isaiah wrote this, The righteous one, my servant, shall make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

The righteous one poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.

[25 : 58] The criminal looks at the man rejected and despised and mocked and condemned and says, That's my king. And Jesus turns to him and gives him the most amazing promise.

Truly, I say to you, today, you'll be with me in paradise. One person wrote, Whatever the criminal expected when he made his request, the promise of Jesus is vastly out of proportion to it.

It's not simply a hope of some indeterminate future day. It's a promise today. It's not you may be. It's not you can be.

It's not you might be. It's truly, I say to you, you will be with me in paradise, in the presence of God himself, in the place of eternal joy.

Amen. How could Jesus make such a promise? According to the Bible, paradise had been lost long ago.

[27 : 10] Adam and Eve had once lived in paradise. They had once dwelt in the garden of God. But then they decided that they wanted a world without God in charge. They desecrated God's temple.

They spoiled the garden, and so they were exiled. And we've continued to spoil and pollute the world and take advantage of one another and mess up the good gifts God has given us ever since. When they left paradise, Genesis says God placed warrior angels, cherubim, with a flaming sword flashing back and forth to prevent anyone from ever accessing the tree of life again. You see, we're all born in exile. We're all born far away from our true home. Every religion tries to tell us how we can get back home, how we can find our way back to paradise. But only Christianity says that God Himself came to us and opened the way Himself in the person of Jesus.

[28 : 40] You see, when Jesus died on the cross, and when He experienced all the humiliation and shame and took upon Himself the sin of the world, He went under that flaming sword, flashing back and forth, the sword of divine justice.

He paid the price that we could never pay. He endured what we could never endure, so that we might have a way in to God's presence, so that we might be able to enter into paradise simply on the basis of what He accomplished for us.

period. John Christostom, the fourth century Egyptian preacher, put it this way, the criminal made his way into paradise with a mere word on the basis of faith alone.

It was not so much a case of His sound values prevailing as the Lord's loving kindness being completely responsible.

What did the criminal say? What did he do? Did he fast? Did he weep? Did he tear his garments? Not at all. On the cross itself, He won salvation.

[30 : 16] He went from cross to heaven, from condemnation to salvation. That's the amazing grace that Jesus offers.

Forgiveness of sins. Assurance of eternal life in His kingdom, a life that begins today. For anyone who acknowledges Him as King and cries out to Him for mercy.

You see, what's so humbling about Christianity is that the only way you can come to Jesus and enter into His kingdom is to come behind this repentant criminal.

Many people wouldn't have wanted to walk into the same room as that guy. The only way in is to come right alongside every other undeserving sinner who acknowledges Jesus' kingly authority and cries out to Him for mercy.

But you see, if he can call out to Jesus and be received into His kingdom, a criminal, an evildoer, a man who just moments ago had been cursing Jesus along with everyone else, anyone can come and be received by Jesus today.

[32 : 01] Father, forgive them. Do you see that in the person of this criminal, God was answering Jesus' prayer?

And God has been answering Jesus' prayer ever since. God has been answering Jesus' prayer ever since.

If you're a follower of Jesus, would you come and worship at His feet and give Him eternal thanks. Let us pray. Let us pray. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 18] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.