

# Looking at the Cross

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# The Crux of the Matter

## Scripture

**Revelation 1:4–7** In John’s greeting, we have an early Christian witness to Jesus’ person and work. Jesus, the faithful martyr, alive and loose in the world, is sovereign and engaged, ruling over and over-ruling all the authorities of earth. And, as if it were the very heart of the matter, John speaks of Jesus’ love, our sin, and the liberating power of the cross.

## Prayer

Almighty God, we live “East of Eden” in a bloody, messy, and broken-down world. Amid the chaos, we hear of a cross standing high, and a voice calls us to draw close and gather beneath it. It looks to be a frightening and anxious place, but those who have been there tell us of good news, of salvation from futility, “not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ . . .” (1 Peter 1:18–19). In your mercy, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to respond to this news of Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. Amen.

## Introduction

Imagine a friend asks you to lunch the morning of Good Friday. “Ah, sorry,” you say, “I’m headed to a worship service at our church that starts at noon today.” “Really?” says your friend. “On Friday, you’re going to worship?” “Yeah,” you say with a smile. “It’s Good Friday, the day we remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then your friend says, “I’ve often wondered about that. Any chance you could give me the summary version of what Good Friday’s all about?” If you had five minutes to give that summary, where might you begin and what might you say?

Many people living in our culture have no idea what the Bible teaches about the death of Jesus, and more than a few of them sit in the church. Those of us who may know words like *atonement* and *propitiation* find ourselves nonetheless challenged to talk

meaningfully about Jesus' death on the cross, and the difference it makes for us and for the world.

This study is designed to get us thinking and talking about this as we make our way into this Lenten season. Clearly, we live in a culture that has removed itself so far from the biblical story that the death of Jesus is often forgotten. Or dismissed.

Consider the story of a young woman, shopping in a jewelry store, who was interested in buying a necklace with a silver cross. "Which of these appeals to you?" asked the clerk. "Well," she said, "I'm not sure. But I don't think I want one with a little man hanging on it."

Who can blame her for that? It's much more appealing, isn't it, to have a silver cross without a man upon it, a symbol of adornment, rather than the reminder of a nightmare? The notion of death by crucifixion is so barbaric to us that it seems better to leave it locked in the history books, with all the other grisly events that we'd just as soon forget.

## **The Fear of the Cross**

The crucifixion of Jesus has been called "the recurring nightmare of the church." To ponder it is to draw close to a violent, bloody, messy, unspeakably cruel death. The Gospels don't dwell on the anguish of crucifixion, but we know about it in great detail from other sources. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus calls it "*the most wretched of deaths*."<sup>1</sup> In his short book, *Crucifixion*, New Testament scholar Martin Hengel describes in detail what we know about first-century executions on a cross. It's not for the squeamish.

Designed to intensify the fear of opposing Roman imperial authority, crucifixion was both torturous and publicly humiliating. The act itself involved a quick series of events and usually followed a brutal scourging. At the site of crucifixion, the prisoner would be stripped naked, made to lie with his back on the ground, his hands either bound or nailed to the horizontal cross-bar, his feet nailed to the vertical pole. The soldiers would hoist the cross and simply drop it into a hole in the ground. Ridicule from the executioners and others was typical and the tortured criminal could do nothing but gasp for air until he died, sometimes after several days.

The earliest followers of Jesus knew firsthand about such events. Most Jews during the Roman occupation would have seen the cruelty. There are many first-century accounts of Jews being crucified by Roman authorities, sometimes in the hundreds and thousands at

1. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.203.

one time. We know this happened, for example, during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 66–70. As Jewish fugitives attempted to flee the surrounded city, they were captured and crucified, to such an extent that the Romans had trouble finding wood for all the crosses that were needed.

Death by crucifixion was intended to terrorize whole communities into submission before the Roman imperial powers. A crucified rebel, left to squirm in agony on a cross, sends a strong message to other would-be rebels.

So the question is pressed: Why would anyone today want to dwell on this?

Why rehearse all the gore and mayhem surrounding Jesus' death? Why not just put it all behind us, as we do with other nightmares, and seek to move forward?

Read the blogs, check out the chat rooms, and it soon becomes apparent: more than a few struggle with Christian claims about the death of Christ. To some, traditional atonement theories seem to condone violence, or even appear to affirm a form of divine child abuse. One theologian put it this way: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff."

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## **The Apostolic Witness**

So why not scrub the cross clean of blood and gore? Why not de-emphasize the nightmare of Jesus' crucifixion? Such questions have resonance in certain quarters today. But the apostolic and historic witness of the church moves in exactly the opposite direction. For the earliest followers of Jesus, the cross is vital, crucial, not to be missed, and much to be celebrated.

Paul, for example, speaks of Christ's death as a matter of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). "We proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23), he claims, and later forcefully states: "I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In Galatians, Paul writes: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14). In his letter to the Romans, he writes about Jesus, "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood" (Romans 3:25). The engine room of hope, for Paul, is to be found at the foot of the cross.

We find the same understanding in the other New Testament epistles. In letters of John and Peter, the cross of Christ is frequent

and central. In 1 John 1:7, for example, we're told that "the blood of Jesus . . . cleanses us from all sin." Or take 1 John 2:1–2, "Jesus Christ the righteous . . . is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." It would be hard to make a more daring and inclusive claim of Jesus' death and its significance.

The emphasis at the beginning of 1 Peter is on how God is at work through the Spirit to bring about obedience to Jesus Christ "and to be sprinkled with his blood." Every devout Jew would understand that phrase to describe a death that somehow deals with sin. Elsewhere, the author explicitly focuses on the cross, citing Isaiah 53, "[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24; cf. Isaiah 53:5).

The letter to the Hebrews is essentially an argument for the primacy of Jesus' person and work, and his atoning significance. Sacrifice for sins was at the center of Jewish religious practice. The author of Hebrews, who writes as a Jew to Jews, repeatedly affirms Jesus as the supreme fulfillment of this practice: "And every priest stands day after day at his services, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God'" (Hebrews 10:11–12).

The book of Revelation offers something of an "exclamation mark" to all this. At the very beginning and throughout this apocalyptic writing, Jesus is marked out as the one who "freed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Much more could be added. Indeed, the New Testament as a whole pulsates with this witness to Christ's death and atoning work. But no documents do so more than the four Gospels. These accounts tell the story of Jesus' life, teachings,

the miracles he did, and the response of the crowds and the authorities. However, what is most striking about the Gospels is how intentionally centered they are on the death of Jesus and the events leading up to it.

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Consider this: approximately 40 percent of the first three (synoptic) Gospels focus on the last week of Jesus' life. That percentage increases to about 66 percent when we come to the Gospel of John. If the Gospels were simply biographies of the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, we would expect a more balanced treatment of the various seasons of his life. But that is not what we find. A vastly disproportionate focus is given over to the last week of Jesus' life, as if to say, "Whatever else you miss, please, don't miss this."

## The Practice of the Church

The church has understood this. For the past two thousand years followers of Christ have placed the cross at the very center of their worship. In the beginning of *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott, an Anglican priest, imagines a non-Christian tourist coming to services at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. As she nears the building, she spots the huge golden cross that sits atop the dome. Upon entering, she observes that the very architecture of the building is cruciform, with its nave and transepts forming the shape of a cross.

As she sits down, the service opens with the entrance of a processional cross, and the congregation begins singing the hymn "Lift High the Cross." Later, people are invited forward to receive the bread and wine, which the minister describes as the body and blood of Christ. She sees the worshipers "signing the cross" on their foreheads and hearts.

At the end, as Stott imagines it, the visitor can be forgiven for wondering, "What are the grounds, and what is the significance, of this concentration on the cross?"<sup>2</sup>

But this is not a recent phenomenon. This focus on the cross goes back into the earliest centuries of church history. It seems likely the cross as a Christian symbol came into use at least as early as the second century. In fact, Christian leaders had to defend themselves, as early as the second century, against the charge of being worshipers of the cross.<sup>3</sup>

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By A.D. 204, the theologian Tertullian said the practice of signing of the cross was encouraged throughout the day: "At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign."<sup>4</sup>

2. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 18.

3. See Justin Martyr, "Apologia," i. 55–60; Minucius Felix, "Octavius," xxix.

4. Tertullian, *The Chaplet/De Corona* 3.4.

St. Augustine (c. 354–430) calls upon Christians to stand under the cross and ponder its message and meaning. He invites his readers to join with the women who drew near as Jesus was crucified:

As they were “looking on,” so we too gaze on his wounds as he hangs. We see his blood as he dies. We see the price offered by the Redeemer, touch the scars of his resurrection. He bows his head, as if to kiss you. His heart is made bare open, as it were, in love to you. His arms are extended that he may embrace you. His whole body is displayed for your redemption. Ponder how great these things are. Let all this be rightly weighed in your mind: as he was once fixed to the cross in every part of his body for you, so he may now be fixed in every part of your soul.<sup>5</sup>

The Reformers, as we shall see, elevated this ancient witness and added to it. For Luther “the cross is our only theology.” Calvin calls it “God’s magnificent theater of glory.”

### **Spiritual Practice**

Take a friend out for coffee. Talk about the strange way Christians call the events of that terrible Friday “good.” See if you can each think of a traumatic experience in your life that was somehow “bent to the good” by God’s grace.

### **Questions for Reflection**

Have you ever struggled with the fact that Jesus’ death was somehow necessary to bring about your salvation? What is at the root of this struggle?

If a friend asked you to talk about the basic meaning of Good Friday, how might you begin your response?

Consider the hymnody of the church. What hymns or choruses come to mind that celebrate the cross?

5. Cited in *Mark*, eds. Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 235.