



Biblical Accounts of the Crucifixion

SESSION 1

A cross is the primary Christian symbol of how God is made known to humanity through Jesus' ugly death and surprising resurrection. The New Testament books describe and reflect upon the crucifixion in a wide variety of ways, reminding us that no single viewpoint can convey the full significance of this event. How do they help us understand what the death of Jesus means for us, for the world, and for God?

Goal for the Session

Understand that the four Gospels offer various pieces of information about Jesus' crucifixion. By looking at their similarities and differences, we can get some clues as to the meaning of the event.

Preparing for the Session

- The Participant Handout and this Leader's Guide contain references to various passages from the Bible. Locate and read these passages in advance of the session, and bring a Bible to the session. Marking the four crucifixion narratives with bookmarks will save time when you want to consult a biblical text during the discussion.
- Invite participants to bring Bibles to the session, have Bibles available for people to use, or consider creating a printed handout that reproduces the four Gospel passages that describe Jesus' crucifixion. Also, provide blank paper and pens or pencils for participants who wish to take notes.
- Review the "Exploring" section of this Leader's Guide, below. First, a brainstorming activity requires you, in advance of the session, to set out sheets of paper (either large sheets attached to a wall or easel or letter-sized sheets placed on tables) and pens in three different stations around your discussion space. The

papers should have a lot of room for groups to write their reflections under these four separate headings: "Mood," "God," "Humanity," and "Me." Write those four words on papers available at each station. Finally, identify the three stations with bright signs reading "Mark and Matthew," "Luke," and "John." If your group will include more than twenty-five people, consider creating six stations—two for "Mark and Matthew," two for "Luke," and two for "John"—so the circulating groups will not need to be too large. Second, a ranking exercise requires you, in advance of the session, to write nine statements on a chalkboard or to prepare a printed handout containing the statements.

- At the end of this Leader's Guide you will find references to other resources to consult for deeper study. None of this material is required reading for you to lead an effective discussion, but the more you and the participants know, the more informed your discussion—and future discussions—will be. Do not hesitate to share the list of resources with participants who have questions or show an interest in further exploration of the subject matter.
- If you have sufficient time and want to create an engaging mood for the group session, consider decorating your discussion space with reproductions of religious art by hanging posters or making books

available. If you have the appropriate technology, you could create a computer-generated slide show of images available on the Internet and legal to use for educational purposes. Let the slide show run in a continuous loop before the session begins, for participants to view as they get settled. See these Web sites for links to artistic representations of the crucifixion: <http://www.textweek.com/art/crucifixion.htm>
<http://catholic-resources.org/Art/index.html>

Teaching Tips

- As the leader, your primary role is to help steer the discussion so it is lively, open to all participants, and responsive to various perspectives. To do this, you do not need to be an expert in the subject matter. Be aware, nevertheless, that the crucifixion narratives in the Gospels are certain to generate numerous questions among people who study them. Questions about arcane details (Where, exactly, was Golgotha located? Why did the soldiers mix myrrh with their wine?) can usually be answered by suggesting that people consult informational notes in a good study Bible or commentaries on the biblical books. Do not presume that you have to be equipped to offer answers. Encourage people in the group to investigate on their own the questions they find interesting, and share with the participants the list of resources provided at the end of this Leader's Guide. Other kinds of questions that people might ask require more complex answers, of course, because they demand that a group reckon with weighty and time-consuming (yet very important) issues that touch on what the Bible is and how we read it most faithfully as Christians. When people ask these kinds of questions (Why does the Bible contain four different accounts instead of just one that might describe the crucifixion for us exactly as it happened? Why does the Participant Handout advise us against harmonizing the details of the four crucifixion stories? Why do people say that the crucifixion narratives vilify Jewish people?), consider posing the questions back to the entire group. One way of doing this, when wrestling with important and controversial questions that are interesting to the whole group, is to frame a discussion that allows people to assess various options. For example, you could respond to a question about the value of harmonizing the Gospels by asking the group, "What advantages might

there be in keeping the crucifixion stories separate? What problems come from that? What do we gain and what do we lose when we fuse or harmonize all the Gospel accounts into a single narrative?"

- As the Participant Handout mentions, Jesus' crucifixion invites us to investigate it in many different ways, along many different angles of exploration. This two-part session of *The Thoughtful Christian* offers a particular way of doing so, through the words, descriptions, and reflections found in a selection of biblical passages. This mode of studying the crucifixion proceeds from the conviction that the New Testament offers us our first, primary encounter with the question, "What does the crucifixion mean?" Before we construct theories to explain or dissect the crucifixion, we must wrestle first with the fact that the biblical writings themselves offer no singular, all-encompassing statement about the meaning of this event. They, especially the Gospels, do invite us to experience and wonder about this event. The Participant Handout and this Leader's Guide attempt to help a group respond to this invitation. The guiding question for this first session is, then, "In light of the Gospel accounts, what does the crucifixion of Jesus indicate about humanity and about God?" For some members of your group—perhaps people who are more interested in analyzing what the cross *does* for humanity or who want to talk about theories of "the atonement"—this question may present a new way of approaching these texts. As the discussion leader, then, you may need occasionally to ask the group to table some issues and redirect participants to the matter of exploring the contours of the Gospel texts. As other, related questions arise and capture the group's interest, take note of them and consider devoting future classes to them.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Prayer

Generous and compassionate God,
look with mercy on your family
for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be
betrayed
and to be given over to the hands of sinners
and to suffer death on a cross.

As we study,
open our eyes, ears, and hearts,
that the message of the cross

might lead us to genuine repentance, faith, and action.

Give us curiosity, imagination,
and patience enough to wait and work for insight.
Through our crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus
Christ. **Amen.**¹

2. Icebreaker

Ask each participant to turn to someone seated nearby, creating groups of two. Invite people to share with their partners their responses to these questions:

- Which Gospel account of Jesus' execution is most meaningful to you? Why?
- Which account makes you most uncomfortable? Why?
- If you're not familiar with the various accounts, answer the above in general based on what you believe the Bible says about the crucifixion.

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Brainstorming in Small Groups

Divide the participants into three groups, and ask each group to go to one of three stations set up around the discussion space. One of these stations should be labeled "Mark and Matthew," one "Luke," and one "John." There should be one group positioned at each station. (If your group includes more than twenty-five people, consider creating six groups and six stations, so that the groups will not be too large.) Tell the groups that they will be at their current station for seven minutes. During that time, each group should do the following:

- Have a member read aloud the crucifixion account from the Gospel assigned to the station (the group at the "Mark and Matthew" station should read only one of those accounts).
- Quickly choose a secretary who will neatly write the group members' reflections on the paper available at the station.
- Offer brief and rapid reflections (brainstorming) on four topics. Members in the group offer their ideas, and the secretary writes them on the paper. The point of brainstorming is to keep comments short and plentiful, allowing all members of a group to give input without worrying about evaluating or commenting upon people's ideas. The reflections should consist of how participants would complete these sentences:

- a. To me, the mood of this Gospel's crucifixion scene is . . .
- b. This Gospel's crucifixion scene makes me think that God is . . .
- c. This Gospel's crucifixion scene makes me think that humanity is . . .
- d. This Gospel's crucifixion scene speaks meaningfully to me through its . . .

Encourage groups to keep their reflections quick and clear, so the papers will become filled with a variety of ideas. After seven minutes have passed, instruct the groups to rotate around the room clockwise, so each group goes to a new station, to discuss a new Gospel. Each group must leave its papers at its previous station, so that the next group can read the comments that others have already offered before beginning its own brainstorming. Repeat the process, and then have the groups rotate a final time, for the third seven-minute period. After the groups have had their time at the three different stations, direct them to reconvene as a large group.

4. Debriefing as a Large Group

When the group has reconvened, ask a handful of people to share their comments on the small-group activity. Have them offer their opinions about which category of reflections seemed to have the widest range of input. Were there any categories about which most people agreed? Finally, ask the group, "Are there aspects of the Gospel passages that our Participant Handout did not mention that you think are particularly important for understanding Jesus' death? These aspects could be either unique to just one Gospel or common to two, three, or all four of them."

Responding (5 minutes)

5. Unanswered Questions

With all the participants reassembled in a large group, ask them to consider what questions they still have concerning the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. People may share their questions aloud—again, in a brainstorming format—or they may write them down and keep them to themselves. If you elect to brainstorm questions with the group, advise people to stick to asking questions only, as opposed to trying to answer other people's questions or evaluate the quality of certain questions. Encourage the group to think about how they might find answers

to their questions, with whom they might discuss their questions, and how their questions will inform their study of the Participant Handout for the second session. Tell people to read that second handout with the group's questions in mind.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Hymn

Invite the group to close by singing or reading together the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

Teaching Alternatives

Ranking Exercise

Ask participants to divide into groups of no more than five people per group. If possible, these groups should be constituted differently than the small groups formed for the brainstorming exercise. Present each group with a list of these nine statements (labeled A–I) that might describe Jesus' crucifixion. Either write the statements on a chalkboard or distribute them on handouts you have prepared in advance:

- a. Jesus dies an anguished death, suffering great physical pain.
- b. Jesus dies as an outcast, identifying with the despised elements of society.
- c. Jesus dies as a victim of human injustice perpetrated against him.
- d. Jesus dies as an expression of his obedience to God's will.
- e. Jesus dies as a model of faithfulness, trusting in God no matter what may come.
- f. Jesus dies because it is all part of God's mysterious plan.
- g. Jesus dies because the people who wield power in human societies always turn on anyone who tries to change the world.
- h. Jesus dies so God can prove that God has power even over death itself.
- i. Jesus dies because God demands a sacrifice in recompense for human sinfulness.

Ask each group to determine together how it would to rank the statements (from one to nine) in response to these three questions:

- How do the Gospels describe the manner of Jesus' crucifixion? Based on your study of the crucifixion

narratives, rank these statements from one to nine, judging how important each statement is for conveying how the Gospels express the crucifixion's significance or how well each statement describes what is happening when Jesus is crucified according to the Gospels.

- How do Christians usually talk about Jesus' crucifixion? Based on your exposure to Christian teaching and worship (church services, sermons, music, Bible studies, and the like), rank these statements again, from one to nine—now according to the frequency in which you hear them when people make reference to the cross.
- How is Jesus' crucifixion meaningful to you? Rank these statements once more from one to nine—now according to how well they characterize your understanding of Jesus' death or how well they capture what is important or touching to you about Jesus' death.

As time permits, have the small groups share their lists of rankings with the entire group.

Considering Art

Consider asking participants to do more than simply read the Participant Handout before they come to the session. Many if not all of us have been deeply shaped by the arts in our thinking about Jesus' execution. Ask people in advance to choose a work of art and reflect on how it creates a particular perspective on Jesus' death or how it might incorporate details from one or more of the Gospels. For example, a participant might do one of the following:

- Listen to a piece of music inspired by the crucifixion (such as one of the "Passion" pieces by J. S. Bach) and think about how it communicates the nuances of one or more of the Gospels.
- Search the Internet or a book for a visual representation of the crucifixion and determine how it reflects one or more of the Gospels.
- Watch a movie about the life and death of Jesus and identify aspects of the crucifixion scene that correspond (or do not correspond) to the biblical accounts.
- Draw a picture of the crucifixion, as it appears in his or her own mind's eye.

You might include time in your session for people to discuss their findings. People can bring their artistic representations with them, for a time of "show and tell."

The Cross and Culture. Ask participants to explore how the cross functions as a symbol in the wider culture. In advance of your group discussion, you could encourage people to bring images that show different crosses appearing in different settings (such as a shimmering, gilded cross in a church sanctuary, a gnarled wooden cross, a person with a cross tattooed on her or his body, national flags with crosses, a bejeweled cross on a necklace, or a cross stitched on a leather motorcycle jacket). Then have the group discuss what the cross symbolizes in our culture. Is it an offensive symbol? A domesticated symbol? Should we view it as an object of precious beauty? Should it remind us of death?

The Cross in Worship. Again, in advance of your discussion, you could ask participants to prepare to think about how the cross functions as a symbol in Christian worship. Ask them to consider how hymns and other Christian music speak about Jesus' death. Is the cross an occasion for confident, victorious language? Do songs appeal to the cross to prompt sadness or repentance? Ask people to compare and contrast, for example, the moods and claims of hymns and then to consider how the hymns may or may not connect to the biblical material you are studying. You can find the lyrics of these and other hymns in most hymnals or online at <http://www.cyberhymnal.org>:

"Deep Were His Wounds, and Red"

"In the Cross of Christ I Glory"

"Lift High the Cross"

"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"

"The Old Rugged Cross"

"Throned upon the Awful Tree"

"Were You There?"

"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

Key Scriptures

These are the biblical passages treated in the Participant Handout, the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion:

Matthew 27:32–56

Mark 15:21–41

Luke 23:26–49

John 19:16b–37

For More Information

For further reference and reading concerning the biblical accounts of Jesus' execution and the realities of crucifixions in the first century, consult these sources:

Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*. 2 vols. Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

Joel B. Green, "Crucifixion" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87–101.

Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

Morna D. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995).

Endnote

1. Adapted from prayers in the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 282, 821.



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Introduction

Jesus' crucifixion invites many kinds of questions. How did it happen? Who, exactly, was responsible? What did Jesus' death and resurrection accomplish? Did the cross expose and repair something about human existence? Did it alter our status before God? What does the execution of an innocent man from first-century Galilee mean for the world today? All these questions deserve our attention. All have occupied Christian thinkers for two millennia. Yet none yields simple answers. This two-part study only opens the door to deeper reflection upon Jesus' crucifixion. Its focus is the New Testament, the ways in which selected writings portray or refer to Jesus' death and, in the process, interpret the meaning of that event. This first session explores the four Gospels' descriptions of the crucifixion. The second looks at language that the apostle Paul employs to help us understand what God accomplishes through Christ's death.

Although the similarities among them outweigh the differences, nevertheless the Gospels do not present Jesus Christ's story in the same way. The slight and sometimes striking variations among them point to differences in their overarching perspectives on Jesus and his importance. The distinctive aspects of each Gospel remind us that these are not disinterested reports of biographical data; rather, the Gospels *interpret* the Christian story as they tell it, inviting us into their particular points of view as they shape our understanding of Jesus and our response to the gospel message. When we allow each Gospel to speak from its own perspective, to influence our imaginations in a particular way, we discover that all four collectively lead us to see the crucifixion as full of rich and complex significance.

The Ignominy of Crucifixion

What kind of death is this that Jesus dies? The Gospels probe that question simply by relating the event.

FOUR STORIES OR ONE?

Sometimes films or liturgies about the crucifixion *harmonize* the Gospel accounts. That is, they combine details from all four to create a single, composite narrative. Christmas pageants do likewise when they put Matthew's magi at the manger with Luke's shepherds. The problem with harmonizing is it creates a depiction that does not exist in any single Gospel. To get inside an individual Gospel's perspective, we need to let its own story speak for itself. The Christian church's ancient decision to include four discrete Gospel accounts in its Bible, not merely one and not a harmonized pastiche, further compels us to listen for each book's distinctive voice.

Obviously, in each Gospel, Jesus dies *on a cross*. This particular mode of execution itself says something about the meaning of Jesus' death. The Gospels do not call attention to the physical anguish that crucifixion inflicted, but they are quite aware of the symbolic weight that crucifixion bestowed. Roman authorities could and did carry out capital punishments using more efficient techniques. The public, cruel spectacle of crucifixion, however, was reserved for certain categories of malfeasants—slaves, insurrectionists, violent criminals. To be crucified was to be branded a threat to the empire. The Romans subjected such people to a painful, prolonged, and humiliating death in full view of the population precisely to make a statement about Roman superiority and the futility of challenging that authority. Not only do the Gospels remind readers that the Son of God died at the hands of humanity but that he died in a manner that expressed the dominant society's contempt for him. He died *crucified*—labeled an enemy, crushed, rejected, and disdained.

How does each Gospel invite us to consider more deeply the nature and significance of Jesus dying this sort of death? As you read through the four accounts, look for details that are distinctive to each, to identify how each Gospel expresses its perspective on the scene. The comments below highlight some of these details and reflect on their importance.

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew

Read Mark 15:21–41 and Matthew 27:32–56. We begin with the two accounts that are nearly identical. Mark, which was written first, and Matthew color Jesus' execution in stark, tragic shades, characterizing Jesus as utterly outcast and raising questions about God's fidelity.

What day is it? These Gospels (along with Luke) place the crucifixion on Passover, which begins at sundown the previous evening (Mark 14:12–16; Matt. 26:17–19; Luke 22:7–13). Passover commemorates God's sheltering the people of Israel from death and freeing them from bondage to a foreign nation. Does Jesus' death strike a sharp contrast, insofar that he dies and God is silent, on this of all days? Or, does his dying intimate a new kind of Passover deliverance?

How does Jesus get to the place called "The Skull"? Mark, Matthew, and Luke describe soldiers conscripting a

THE FAMILIAR "SCRIPT"

The Gospels view Jesus' death in light of other biblical texts. Sometimes they explicitly call attention to things that "fulfill" or recall words from the Scriptures. Other times they include details that subtly allude to Scripture. Consider Mark, for example. Mention of darkness (15:33) and the offer of sour wine (15:36) recalls Amos 8:9 and Psalm 69:21. There is also a kind of reverse movement through Psalm 22, from using lots to divide Jesus' clothes in 15:24 (Ps. 22:18), through people wagging their heads in 15:29 (Ps. 22:7), to the climax of Jesus' cry in 15:34 (Ps. 22:1). The four Gospels employ scriptural images differently and probably for different reasons, but these allusions and citations suggest that Jesus' crucifixion is no accident. God's ways are somehow playing themselves out. The Scriptures are coming to life again, bringing new but familiar meaning to God's presence in a new situation.

passerby to carry Jesus' cross for him. Simon appears to have stumbled onto the wrong place at the wrong time. The Gospels do not explain why his services are required; Jesus either is unable or refuses to carry his cross. In any case, Simon's activity continues a pattern of Jesus' inactivity in Mark and Matthew. Jesus hardly *does* anything in these scenes. He is described more like a passive object than an active subject. He is acted upon—processed, compelled, and crucified.

How is Jesus portrayed? The Gospels present Jesus' procession from condemnation to death with royal overtones. Just prior to the crucifixion scene, Jesus' tormentors mock the suggestion that there is anything regal about this so-called king through their burlesque actions: clothing him in bright colors, giving him a crown and reed, saluting him, and kneeling before him (Mark 15:17–19; Matt. 27:28–30). The wine they offer him at Golgotha mimics a king drinking from a cup at his coronation. On the cross, the written charges bestow a royal title upon Jesus. From the cruel parody springs a theological irony: the cross represents an enthronement.

Who is present? In these Gospels the view from the cross sees only rejection and abandonment. Jesus' followers turn from him much earlier (Mark 14:50–52, 66–72; Matt. 26:56, 69–75). The crowds express hostility (Mark

15:11–14, 29–30; Matt. 27:20–23, 39–40). Roman authority rejects him (Mark 15:1–20; Matt. 27:11–26). Members of the local Jewish leadership hurl condemnation (Mark 15:31–32; Matt. 27:41–43). Even his fellow outcasts heap scorn from their crosses (Mark 15:32; Matt. 27:44). No one stands in allegiance with Jesus. This implicates all in his execution, while highlighting that this manner of dying reflects some of the worst treatment that humanity can inflict upon its rejects. Only after Jesus expires do Mark and Matthew draw our attention to a group of women whom the narratives have kept invisible, all of them Jesus' longtime followers who observe, yet "from a distance."

How does Jesus die? Jesus' only statement from the cross, his only spoken words since standing before Pilate, expresses anguish and accusation: "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). Not only have people abandoned him, so has God. The scene resembles Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9–11; Matt. 3:13–17) but in reverse. At the baptism, God claims Jesus as "Son," but at the cross Jesus laments God's absence. The Spirit enters Jesus at his baptism; at his death he breathes out his life (Greek uses the same word to denote both spirit and breath). The tearing temple curtain recalls the tearing heavens in Mark 1:10, even as the opening graves in Matthew recall the opening heavens in Matthew 3:16. The Gospels explain neither the significance of this imagery nor the meaning of Jesus' cry. They do, however, beckon us to dwell in their discomfort and mystery. On one hand, Jesus' words contribute to a scene of unmistakable tragedy. He who claimed God's authority, who spoke of his fate as if it were God's plan (see Mark 8:31–32; 9:31; 10:32–34; 14:36), now dies disappointed, utterly devastated. On the other hand, subsequent events—the torn curtain, the open graves, the words of the Roman

centurion, and the women watching from afar—suggest that things are not finished, that there will be more to see. But if Jesus dies without expressing trust in God, we might legitimately ask, How, then, can we? To force and then open up that question, Mark and Matthew make us wait to read about Easter.

The Gospel of Luke

Read Luke 23:26–49. We have already seen some ways in which Luke's description resembles Mark's and Matthew's. At the same time, Luke's language and imagery signifying Jesus' kingship are

softer than that of those two accounts. Other distinctive aspects of this Gospel draw us further toward a different perspective on Jesus' death. Jesus' trials earlier in Luke stress his innocence, and his faithful conduct in the face of the crucifixion's injustice intensifies the judgment against those who schemed to do away with him (compare Acts 7:52).

Who is present? After Simon takes up the cross, Luke mentions that many people lament what is happening to Jesus, just as many express remorse right after he dies. The public does not deride him. Jesus has numerous supporters (also Luke includes no mention of a mass defection of disciples at Jesus' arrest), and he addresses them concerning future calamities. Furthermore, one of those crucified with him defends his innocence and asks to be remembered. Jesus answers him with confidence, showing that he continues to attract seekers and bring salvation to others even as he dies.

How does Jesus die? In stark contrast to his final words in Mark and Matthew, here Jesus dies with an expression of trust in his Father (quoting Ps. 31:5). His death, far from a tragedy, preserves his dignity, insofar as he is faithful to the end and those nearby are moved with anguish in response to the dismal spectacle. The killing of an innocent savior prompts remorse from most observers and antagonism only from the leaders who prosecuted the case against him. The Roman centurion, instead of commenting on Jesus' identity as "God's son," remarks on his innocence. Despite the travesty of justice inflicted upon him, Jesus embodies justice in his faithful manner of dying.



DON'T RUSH TO EASTER

The Gospels describe Christ's crucifixion rather than analyze it. This draws us into their stories of Jesus' death—stories that can disturb us even as they make us grasp for answers to the deep questions that they pose. Many manage to deny the murky complexions of these stories by reading them only through the filter of a confident Easter faith. That kind of approach blunts the ways that the Gospel narratives invite readers first to dwell in the midst of the crucifixion scenes.

BLOOD AND WATER

Some interpreters seek a physiological explanation to John's odd detail of the fluids that pour from Jesus' lifeless body after a soldier spears it. This adds realism to the account while implying that Jesus indeed had a real human body. Other interpreters suspect that the detail's function is symbolic. If so, it might be an obscure reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Another possible, and more likely, symbolic interpretation is that the water flowing out with Jesus' lifeblood points toward the Holy Spirit that his followers will receive from him, the source of "living water" (see John 7:37–39; 4:14; 6:35).

The Gospel of John

Read John 19:16b–37. Of the four Gospels, John is the most unlike the others. This uniqueness extends to John's treatment of the crucifixion. John refers early and often to Jesus' death, including passages that speak of its purpose (see 10:17–18; 11:47–53). John also occasionally characterizes the crucifixion—the event where Jesus is literally and figuratively "lifted up" (see 3:14–15; 8:21–30; 12:32–33)—as the beginning of the Son's glorification (see 12:23–28; 17:1–5). Like the other Gospels, John's account also highlights Jesus' royal identity.

What day is it? John's Gospel sets the crucifixion during the afternoon immediately *prior* to the beginning of Passover (19:14), at about the time when lambs would be slaughtered for Passover meals. This underscores John's unique emphasis on Jesus as "Lamb of God" (1:29, 36). John likens Jesus to Passover lambs, which once marked the people of Israel for protection against death (Exod. 12:1–28). Associating Jesus with these lambs also explains the notation about his bones remaining unbroken (see Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12).

How does Jesus get to the place called "The Skull"? Simon never appears. Jesus bears his cross alone. John refuses to portray Jesus as victimized or overpowered by his human persecutors. Indeed, even "the ruler of this world," the devil, does not overwhelm him (14:30–31). Throughout John's crucifixion scene Jesus holds sway over his circumstances in a way that recalls his declaration in 10:17–18. He gives his life willingly; no one has the authority to take it (see also 19:10–11).

Who is present? Similar to Luke's Gospel, Jesus does not die alone in John. At least several female followers and one male follower stand near the cross. Even as his own life nears its end, Jesus ensures care for the vulnerable, making provision for his mother to receive support when he is gone.

How does Jesus die? Jesus dies in command of the situation, on his own terms. John mentions no expressions of anguish. Even Jesus' wish to take a drink before dying is attributed not to physical need but to his intention to fulfill Scripture. He dies voluntarily, and his final words, "'It is finished'" (19:30), express completion or accomplishment. In dying, Jesus does his job; he himself *completes* the work his Father gives him (see 4:34; 17:4). The confident tones of this scene highlight Jesus' role as the primary actor.

Considering the Cross

The cross of Jesus resists easy answers, especially when we read the Gospel descriptions in light of the Christian confession that this is no ordinary man but the Son of God who endures the humiliation of crucifixion and experiences death. Other biblical passages—whether in the Gospels (such as the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Paul's letters (which are the focus of this study's second session), or other New Testament books—contribute additional dimensions for reflecting on the crucifixion's meaning. But the fact remains that the Gospels' basic and varied descriptions of the event have the power to lead us deeply into the cross's mysteries as they confront us with heavy questions: What does it say about humanity—the members and institutions of human societies—to have brought Jesus to such a fate? What does it say about God to have overseen and endured such an event? Do the Gospels prompt us to see good news here?

About the Writer

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