

# The Cross

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## **Text:**

Matthew 16:13-28

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some *say that thou art* John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

## **Introduction:**

We have been meditating this week on the cross of Christ. It is Christianity's most recognized symbol. Almost everyone both friend and foe of Christ and his Church would associate it with

Christianity, but what does it mean, what does it represent? This is the question before us this morning.

If, today, the cross is the most universal symbol of the Christian Faith, it was not its first symbol. In fact, it occurs only rarely in the earliest Christian art. The earliest Christian symbol was the fish. This was because of Jesus' association with fisherman, and his telling them that they would become "fishers of men". It was also associated with the multiplication of the bread and the fish. But its primary origin was that the five letters of the Greek word for fish "*Ichthus*", formed an acrostic that was a very succinct summary of what Christians believed about Jesus Christ. It was as follows:

I for *Iesous* – Jesus

Ch for *Christos* – Christ

Th for *Theou*—of God

U for *uios* – Son

S for *soter* – Savior

When you put that together it says: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Savior, which is a very cryptic statement of what Christians believe about Jesus Christ.

Since Christianity was, until the time of Constantine the Great, an illegal religion in the Roman Empire, and Christ had been executed on a Roman cross, it is understandable why Christians would have been hesitant about displaying crosses. All of their art tended to be somewhat cryptic. This is why the fish functioned so well. What is more common than a fish, and yet to the initiated it spoke volumes. The first crosses were disguised in another symbol, the anchor. The anchor as a symbol was based on Hebrews 6:19-20: "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." By adding a crossbar to the anchor we again have a beautiful representation of the hope that we have through the cross of Christ, but to the Romans it would have passed unnoticed.

The first actual representation of a crucifixion that has been discovered is a mockery of Christians. It dates from the second half of the second century. It is a representation of a crucified donkey head and beneath has the inscription in Greek: "Alexander worships his God". This demonstrates the way the unbelieving world perceived the cross in the early days of the Christian Faith. It echoes the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 1:18-25:

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

In the text we have read this morning we see Jesus facing his own cross when he tells the disciples immediately after Peter has acknowledged that he is the Messiah that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die and be raised again. This idea being totally foreign to the thinking of the disciples causes Peter to object with words: “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.” To these words Jesus replies with words he has already spoken to them in Matthew 10 and will speak to them again: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me”.

This passage places us before the double reality of the cross. First, it speaks of the work of Christ; secondly, it defines discipleship. I want us to meditate on that double reality by asking two questions: “What did the cross mean for Christ?” “What does the cross mean for me?”

### **What did the Cross Mean for Christ?**

The first thing the cross meant for Christ was incomprehension. No one was expecting a suffering Messiah. This is obvious in the reaction of the disciples to his announcement of his upcoming death in Jerusalem, and explains Peter’s reaction that we have already pointed out. Even though Christ’s sacrificial death for sinners had been clearly prophesized in the Old Testament, the Jews, as a whole, had not grasped the idea of a suffering messiah. They were expecting a glorious Messiah who would overthrow their enemies and establish Jerusalem as the righteous and glorious capital of the world.

Passages like Isaiah 53:6: “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and God has laid on him the iniquity of us all” had puzzled them to the point that they had paraphrased them in Aramaic to have a completely different meaning: “All we like

sheep have been scattered; we have gone into exile, everyone his own way; and before the Lord it was a pleasure to forgive the sins of us all for his sake.”

This incomprehension on the part of even his closest associates meant that Jesus ultimately suffered alone without even the comfort, understanding and support of his closest associates and friends.

Not only did the cross mean incomprehension for Christ, it also meant extreme suffering. No death was worse than the death of the cross, yet Jesus knew, at least from the time of his baptism that the way he had chosen was the way that would lead to a Roman cross. He knew that to accomplish the mission he had been sent from heaven to fulfill would require his dying, and he knew that his death would be by crucifixion. Given the frequency of crucifixion in first century Judea, he had no doubt observed others dying on crosses. He knew what awaited him as he made his way to his appointment with destiny in Jerusalem.

Our most intense adjective for the description of pain is “excruciating”. It comes from the Latin *crux*, “cross”, and literally means the pain of the cross. Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. So horrible that although the Romans practiced it they rarely wrote of it as is born out in the following quote from what is probably the most important recent book on the subject:

“We have very few detailed descriptions of crucifixion from Roman times. The passion narratives from the Gospels are the most detailed of all. No ancient writer wanted to dwell on this cruel procedure.”

“Even in the Roman empire, where there might be said to be some kind of ‘norm’ for the course of the execution (it included a flogging before hand, and the victim often carried the beam to the place of execution, where he was nailed to it with outstretched arms, raised up and seated on a small wooden peg), the form of execution could vary considerably: crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full rein. All attempts to give a perfect description of the crucifixion in archaeological terms are therefore in vain; there were too many different possibilities for the executioner. Seneca’s testimony speaks for itself:

“I see crosses there, not just one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet.” (Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, p. 25).

It was so horrible and painful that I do not want to dwell long on the horrors of death by crucifixion, but at the same time I want you to understand what you are confessing when you say: “suffered under Pontious Pilate, crucified”, or when you sing: “Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe sin had left a crimson stain, he left it white as snow.”

There is much that could be said in describing the pain and suffering of death by crucifixion. Allow me just one quote from medical doctor, Alexander Metherell, who has done extensive research on the subject.

“Once a person is hanging in the vertical position, crucifixion is essentially an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation.”

“The reason is that the stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the tarsal bones.”

“After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath in. Again he’d have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn’t be able to push up and breathe anymore.” (Alexander Metherell, in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 265).

To incomprehension and suffering we could add many other things like shame and injustice, if time permitted, but we will conclude with the most important, victory. The hope of the world is found in the victory of the cross. It is a mystery, but Christ by his sufferings has set things right. He has overcome our great enemies, sin and death: “O death, where *is* thy sting? O grave, where *is* thy victory? The sting of death *is* sin; and the strength of sin *is* the law. But thanks *be* to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). It is Christ’s victory on the cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead that overcomes our ultimate enemy, death and gives us the hope of eternal life. Without the cross of Christ we would be without hope of salvation and eternal life.

## II. What does the Cross Mean for Us?

Jesus makes it clear in our text, and Christians have always understood, that the cross was not just for Christ, but that it also represents something at the center of Christian discipleship. We express this in song when we sing:

“Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free?

No there’s a cross for everyone, and there’s a cross for me.”

What did Jesus then mean when he said: “If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”?

The first part of the answer is that it does not mean the same thing for us that it did for him. He was the unique Lamb of God who suffered for the sins of the world. He alone was worthy to be a sacrifice for our sins. Taking up our cross has nothing to do with suffering for our own sins or for the sins of others. The work of redemption was completed in the cross of Christ. It would be impossible for us to add anything to it.

We should also add that bearing our cross does not, as it is sometimes taken, mean our suffering in general. What it does mean and where it is parallel to the sufferings of Christ is our acceptance of God's will whatever it is, and wherever it takes us. We take up our cross just as Jesus did when we pray as he did: "If possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not my will but thine be done."

Christians are by nature and by calling people who give up their own will, their own desires to do God's will, whatever that may be. Jesus set the example when he "set his face towards Jerusalem"; when he "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross", and we are called to follow him.