

# The Crucified God

## I Corinthians 1:18

Speaker: Gary McMahan

Please turn to John 1

Genesis 15:1 “the word of the Lord came to Abraham”

Exodus 9:20 “those who feared the word of the Lord fled into their houses”

Exodus 9:21 “those who despised the word of the Lord left their servants/livestock in the field”

I Samuel 3:7 “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, nor had the word of the Lord yet been revealed to him”

I Samuel 15:23 “because you (Saul) have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from *being* king”

II Samuel 12:9-10 “you (David) despised the word of the Lord... the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me”

Jeremiah – 57

Ezekiel – 60

Zechariah – 13

Hebrews 4:12 “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we will give an account”

Over 250 times in the OT, over 50 times in the NT

Hebrews 4:12 “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him to whom we will give an account”

The Word of God stands in the place of God Himself – alive, active, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, handing out reward/punishment.

But when and how did “the word of the Lord” become so embedded in the Biblical tradition?

Well, it began “in the beginning,” when “God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.”

Genesis 1:3 Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

Psalms 33:6 “the heavens were made by the word of the Lord, and all their host by the breath of His mouth”

This is the tradition in mind at the beginning of the Gospel of John – with a direct reference right back to Genesis 1:

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

The all-powerful word of God, standing in the place of God Himself - embodying all that is God. There at the moment of Creation, as we already knew.

John 1:2 “He was in the beginning with God.”

John 1:14 “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”

The all-powerful Word there with God - there with God at the moment of creation stepped out of obscurity and into human flesh, got a name.

His name was Jesus. He was not a part of God; He was not part-God and part-man; He was the fullness of God in bodily form; He was the God-Man -- the Word through whom God created the world incarnated as a man

Everything the Bible credits to the Word of God/God Himself – power, faithfulness, eternity, knowledge, righteousness, glory, grace, truth – now embodied

This is the doctrine known as the Incarnation

The Gospel story: From Word Incarnated to redemption in Jesus' name.

The Incarnation began God's earthly life – his auto-biography, which He custom-wrote Himself before the fact. It wasn't His last resort, it wasn't His emergency procedure, it wasn't a frantic attempt to clean up the mess, it was Plan A -- redemption, forgiveness, eternal life, grace, resurrection, eternal glory, all for us.

What did Plan A cost God? It required Him to set aside His royal eminence - step down from kingship and take on, not just human flesh, but impoverished, harassed, betrayed, forsaken, rejected – the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head – human flesh, and, in

a final act of emptying Himself, to die. He planned for our gain to come through His loss, because He's a giver.

I believe that God was required to do nothing – that He was under no obligations or constraints, other than those of His own making. It was His will only because He willed it that way. We all know that Jesus led a tough life. Why didn't God plot out an easier path with a less savage ending? There's lots of bloody ways to die.

Do the impossible: put yourself in God's shoes. If you were God, and you could write your own earthly life, how much loss would you write in for yourself?

If you had all eternity and all glory and all majesty and all power and all knowledge; if no obligations were imposed on you from the outside; if no avenue was outside your creative genius; if you had the whole universe at your disposal (or any universe you chose to create); if you could create any path for yourself toward any destination; if anything and everything was there for the taking; if you could design the time, place and manner of your own death by simply decreeing it, what script would you have written for your life?

### Crucifixion

- It was practiced by the Persians 5 centuries earlier, at least
- There was no standard method of crucifixion – it was left to the needs of the executioner
- Seneca: “I see crosses there, not just of 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.”
- Jesus' example, the recent discovery
- The agony of breathing
- The exact cause of death is still a mystery (suffocation? blood-loss? heart attack?)
- Death could easily take more than a day
- It was a particularly brutal, agonizing way to die, by design
- While we prohibit “cruel and unusual” punishment, the Romans had no such limitations

## Humiliation

- Crucifixion was a deterrent – runaway/disobedient slaves, criminals and state enemies
- The slave rebellion of Spartacus – 6,000 slaves were crucified
- Josephus: After a revolt in Judea/Galilee, just before the time of Jesus, 2,000 were crucified at once
- Josephus: “They were first whipped, and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died and were then crucified before the city wall. Titus hoped that the gruesome sight of the countless crosses might move them to surrender. So the soldiers, out of rage and hatred toward the prisoners, nailed those they caught, in different postures, to the crosses, by way of jest, and their number was so great that there was not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies.”
- The point was to maximize the sense of humiliation and shame
- Crucifixions occurred in places where they could be easily observed
- On major thoroughfares (slaves going to the market)
- Jesus – mock robe & worship, whipped, spit on, insulted, crown of thorns, criminals on His right & left, may have taken His clothes before He was nailed to the Cross, crucified someplace where people could easily taunt Him
- After death, the body was often left on the cross for days to become food for the animals – Jesus’ quick execution was extremely unusual, as was His careful burial

Juvenal: “The vulture hurries from dead cattle and dogs and crosses to bring some of the meat to her offspring.”

- No wonder Paul was so insistent with Philemon
- The disciples deserting Jesus the night of his arrest
- Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion

Cicero: “How grievous a thing it is to be disgraced by a public court... to suffer a fine... to suffer banishment... yet we retain some degree of liberty... But the executioner... and the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of the Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears”

- It was such a potent symbol of disgraceful horror, that it was simply not discussed in polite/noble society (or any society)

## The message of the Cross

Plan A for God: to victimize Himself horrifically and disgracefully – to literally carry the very symbol of horrific suffering and shame to the place where He would be nailed to it

Plan A was to become the Crucified God -- the polar opposite of nobility – to contradict/nullify everything the world might call glorious/noble/wise – to exalt Himself through shame and humiliation

I don't think God chose crucifixion because it was the most painful death, but because it was the most humiliating

I think if there was a more shameful way to die, God would have chosen it for Jesus

- The manner in which Jesus died mattered – it was at the very heart of the matter

1 Corinthians 2:2 “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”

Hebrews 12:2 “(look to Jesus), who, for the joy set before Him, having endured the cross and despised the shame, sat down at the right hand of God”

It was the message – by preaching Christ Crucified, the early Christians shattered all existing notions about what religion could be – there simply were no 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek/Jewish categories for making sense of a Crucified God-King

The Cross was an offense to the people the early Christians preached to – it was the offense of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world... God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who 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.”

I know of no parallels to the Cross in our modern American culture – nothing that evokes a similar sense of head-turning revulsion – nothing that emits the same sense of deplorable humiliation and shame

This may cause us to forget what the cross represents and without realizing it eliminate the stench

We might think of the Cross as a symbol of nobility and honor – the last thing the Romans wanted the cross to communicate was noble self-sacrifice

Something fundamental might be lost in both the Christian message and the work of Christ

It's important that the Cross maintain its stench of shame

- The Cross is where we come face to face with Adam's sin within ourselves – it leaves no room for pride, arrogance, self-interest, self-righteousness -- It leaves us with no ego to guard and no boasts to make – it leaves us only humility

Philippians 2:3-8 With humility of mind, consider one another as more important than yourselves... Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who... emptied Himself... and... humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Paul wasn't asking the church to do anything that he hadn't already done

Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ"

- That made the Cross was the very image of discipleship, because it was declared so, by Jesus, even before He died on it

Luke 14:27 "Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow after Me cannot be My disciple"

How could anyone possibly have understood what Jesus meant? We know the disciples didn't – when Jesus was arrested, they voted with their feet

The message of Acts – the disciples return to the Cross and carry it to the nations

Seneca: "Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain, dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree... drawing the breath of life amid long drawn-out agony?"