

The Cross

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The Romans made thousands of people victims of crucifixion. Such a brutal and horrific manner of death sent a strong message to those who would consider defying the power of Rome. This imperial muscle flexing was done with efficiency and indifference to the plight of its victim. Jesus of Nazareth was just another victim for the soldiers. None of them realized that the very man they were cursing by nailing Him to a tree was taking the curse of sin upon Himself. The death of Jesus is central in the history of redemption. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul discusses the crucifixion of Christ.

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23; John 18–19

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To identify various perspectives on the crucifixion of Christ.
2. To discuss the forsakenness of Christ on the cross.
3. To describe the role of God the Father in the crucifixion of Christ.

QUOTATIONS

Death by crucifixion was one of the cruelest and most degrading forms of punishment ever conceived by human perversity, even in the eyes of the pagan world. Josephus described it as “the most wretched of all ways of dying,” and the shudder caused by the cross as an instrument of execution is still reflected in the English word “excruciating.” Yet in the Roman provinces crucifixion was one of the customary means of preserving

public order, and the history of turbulent Judea is punctuated by accounts of men being crucified. So unimportant was the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth—from a Roman point of view that Tacitus—in his review of the troubles in Judea, comments, “Under Tiberius nothing happened.”

In Christian perspective the cross of Christ is the focal point of the gospel. Here God dealt definitively with the problem of human rebellion and made provision for the salvation of men . . . The account of Jesus’ crucifixion thus became the center point of the joyful tidings proclaimed by the church, in the conviction that the message centering in the cross was empowered by God to overturn the note of offense and the objections of human cleverness and to bring men into the experience of redemption.

—William L. Lane

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. Crucifixion was the normal method of executing criminals in the Roman Empire.
 1. Thousands of people were executed through crucifixion, but only one victim of crucifixion has their death celebrated internationally each year.
 2. Jesus’ crucifixion is significant because it was the death of a king and His death provided an atonement for sin.
- B. Pilate viewed Jesus’ death as the elimination of a revolutionary.
 1. The religious leaders viewed Jesus’ death as expedient to reinforce their religious authority.
 2. The Roman soldiers viewed the crucifixion of Christ as just another death, although the commander confessed his belief in the Son of God.
 3. Few witnesses realized that Jesus was satisfying the demands of God’s justice against sinners on the cross.
- C. “And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, “I am the Son of God.”’ And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way” (Matt. 27:37–44).
 - The gospel writers label the mocking of the crowd as blasphemy because Jesus was deity.

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- D. “Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matt. 27:45–46).
1. Why would Jesus who was the perfect Son of God cry out from the cross that God had forsaken Him?
 2. Jesus is quoting Psalm 22 with these words.
- E. Jesus did not simply *feel* forsaken, but rather He truly *was* forsaken by God.
1. Jesus had to bear in Himself the full measure of divine punishment in order to satisfy the demands of God’s justice.
 2. Jesus became the most obscene thing in all of creation on the cross because concentrated on Him was the corporate wickedness of every man.
 3. The punishment of hell and the full measure of divine forsakenness was placed upon Jesus.
- F. “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1).
1. Paul proceeds to discuss the relevance of the crucifixion for the Galatian believers.
 2. “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:9–13).
- G. Paul elaborates on the significance of Christ’s death by referring to Jewish law rather than Roman law.
1. God outlined a series of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.
 2. The disobedient were hung on a tree as a curse; and Christ took this curse upon Himself.
- H. The Day of Atonement featured two significant symbolic acts.
1. A lamb was slaughtered to make atonement for sins.

2. The sin of the covenant community was transferred to the scapegoat which was released outside the camp.
- I. Paul looks at the cross of Christ as satisfying the curse of the law because Jesus becomes the curse.
 1. The symbolic acts of the Day of Atonement foreshadowed the work of Christ.
 2. Jesus was not stoned in accordance with Jewish law because such a death would not fulfill the law of God.
 - J. Jesus was handed over to the Gentiles in accordance with the prophets' words.
 - K. Jesus was crucified at Golgotha outside the walls of Jerusalem just as the scapegoat bearing the sins of the people was sent outside the camp.
 - L. Darkness descends on the land as Jesus expires on the cross.
 - M. The priests blessed the people of Israel with the following blessing.
 1. "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24–26).
 2. The supreme blessing for the Israelites was the favorable gaze of God.
 3. The ultimate promise for the Israelite was the hope of one day seeing God's face in all His glory.
 - N. God the Father turns the lights out and turns His back on His Son as He has become the incarnation of human sin.
 - Jesus cries out regarding the forsakenness He feels as He experiences the full agony of God's abandonment and hell.
 - O. Jesus declares, "It is finished" and, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit," as His last words.
 - In the midst of His abandonment Jesus trusts His Father and drinks the cup of divine wrath for us.

BIBLE STUDY

1. What use did the blood of lambs and goats have under the old covenant? Consider the following verses in your answer: Ex. 24:8; Lev. 8:22–24; 14:14, 25; Zech. 9:11. What use does blood have in the new covenant (see Jer. 31:31; Matt. 26:27–29)?

2. Read Exodus 16; John 6:35; and Hebrews 9:13–15. What is the significance of the particular elements Jesus chooses to use during the Last Supper?
3. Much of John 19:1–16 is portrayed in what is called “dramatic irony.” Something is considered “ironic” if there is something the writer and reader know about a character that makes the events recorded more significant. Since you, the reader, understand John’s previous portrayal of Jesus as the eternal God who has become flesh, ask yourself what is ironic about:
 - a) the way Jesus is dressed in verses 1–3?
 - b) the charge made against Him in verse 7?
 - c) Pilate’s question in verse 9?
 - d) Pilate’s claim to power in verse 10?
 - e) who is sitting on the judgment seat in verse 13?
4. How is Jesus’ greatest moment of humiliation also a great moment of triumph? How does the cross fulfill the promise found in Genesis 3:15?
5. What do the dramatic events that occur in connection with the death of Jesus recorded in Matthew 27:50–53 symbolize?
6. What did Jesus mean with His words “It is finished”? What was “finished” at that time? What, consequently, was begun?

DISCUSSION

1. Looking over John 19 and remembering that the author’s reason for writing his gospel is so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name,” how does this chapter accomplish this goal?
2. Why does the announcement of betrayal shock Jesus’ disciples? How was Judas able to blend in with the other eleven over the course of His ministry?
3. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Consider an area of your life—both corporately as a church and individually as one member of the body—in which this prayer could or should apply.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Keener, Craig. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*
France, R.T. *The Gospel of Mark*
Sproul, R.C. *John* (St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary)
Sproul, R.C. *The Truth of the Cross*
Stein, Robert H. *Luke*