

Glory in the Cross

It is probably obvious that the major part of the story in the four Gospels is devoted to the final week of Jesus' life. Matthew devotes chapters 21-28, Mark chapters 11 to 16, Luke from halfway through chapter 19 to chapter 24 and John chapters 12 to 20; almost one third of the total describing Jesus' death and the events immediately leading up to it. Besides this, there are numerous comments anticipating the final events.

In the Gospels we see a man drawing inexorably closer to what he knows will be a horrible and excruciatingly painful death. We see the hostility of the opposition intensify, often with some provocation from Jesus himself (see Matt 23). For instance, the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12) was aimed directly at the elders of Israel and that led to the otherwise unthinkable coalition of Pharisees and Herodians in order to trap him (Mark 12:13; see also Mark 3:5).

Jesus' final night was spent in rather intense discussion with the twelve disciples. Whether it was a Passover meal, as in Matthew, Mark and Luke, or whether it was a meal anticipating the Passover, as in John, there was none of the usual rejoicing. Their hearts were troubled. The discussion focussed on his impending betrayal, death and absence from them, with all that that absence implied. There were also warnings about the disciples suffering because of their association with Jesus. Then, in the early hours of Friday morning, Jesus went with the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, where the agony of anticipation was greatly intensified.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."³³He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."³⁷He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?" ³⁸Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:32-38).

Some ancient manuscripts tell us that, at that time, 'In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground' (Luke 22:44).

Jesus' arrest took place before sunrise on Friday morning. He was taken first to the house of Annas, then to Caiaphas, then to Pilate, then to Herod and then back to Pilate. All the while it was cold. And all the while Jesus was in the hands of his enemies whose hatred at last had an opportunity for expression. They mocked and beat him, having blindfolded him and ridiculed him (Luke 22:63-65). There should be no doubt of the intensity of their hatred. But there was one thing the leaders of Judea could not do, that was legally to inflict the death penalty. For that they needed the authorisation of the governor.¹ Furthermore they wanted crucifixion!

¹ See A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1963, pp. 24-47.

The New Testament gives few details of crucifixion; probably there were few needed for the first readers would have seen crucifixion often enough.² On reflection, though, the physical side of crucifixion was not the major issue, as the apostolic gospel would later reveal. But still

after flogging Jesus, [Pilate] handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ³⁰They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (Matt. 27:26-31).

The flogging was a routine part of the execution. It was carried out with a whip with many strands, each strand having pieces of bone or lead tied into it. Not only did the flogging reduce the condemned person to a physical wreck, it often did kill if not administered carefully. The soldiers of the governor were quite possibly recruited from Syria³, and Josephus notes their hatred of Jews,⁴ but even so their treatment of condemned prisoners was savage. Much has been made of the crown of thorns, mentioned briefly in Matthew, Mark and John, but that was probably more for the purpose of ridicule than of inflicting pain. Perhaps there was an ironic element to the mention of thorns, given the initial curse (Gen. 3:18)? But there is small wonder that, when forced to carry his own cross, it became necessary to have Simon of Cyrene carry it behind him (Luke 23:26).

Crucifixion was intended to be both a means of execution and a warning to onlookers of the severity of Roman law. Those crucified could take up to a week to die, being left to hang in a public place for all to see. It has been described as 'a "barbaric" form of execution of the utmost cruelty' and as 'the supreme Roman penalty'⁵ The prisoners were evidently stripped naked, to heighten the indignity, and were nailed in both hands⁶ (or wrists⁷) and feet to a wooden 'cross' (of whatever shape) where they were left to hang until they died. Often, to heighten the disgrace, the bodies were left on the cross after death, as carrion for birds or to rot.⁸ 'Crucifixion itself damaged no vital organs, nor did it result in excessive bleeding ... Death came slowly, sometimes after several days, through shock or a painful process of asphyxiation as the muscles used in breathing suffered increasing fatigue.'⁹

Immediately prior to Jesus' crucifixion he was offered a drink of wine mixed with gall (Matt. 27:34) and again later (Mark 15:36; John 19:29). The wine was bitter, and

² The account of Jesus' death in the Gospels is actually the most detailed of all the ancient descriptions of crucifixion.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 958.

⁴ B.J. I.87.

⁵ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, SCM, London, 1977, p. 22, 33.

⁶ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, p. 31.

⁷ J. B. Green ('Death of Jesus' in Joel B. Green *et al* (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1992, p. 147) says that this was an assumption based on initial examination of the bones of a man who had been crucified in northern Israel about the middle of the first century. R. E. Brown (*The Death of the Messiah*, Volume Two, Doubleday, New York, 1994, p. 950) points out that 'nails through the palms would not carry the weight of a body but would tear away'. This would be more likely as there is evidence that often the feet were not nailed and the condemned person was supported by their 'hands' and a block of wood to support the buttocks. This support was not an act of mercy but was intended to prolong the suffering.

⁸ There are references to animals attacking while the condemned were still alive.

⁹ Green, 'Death of Jesus' p. 147.

was possibly offered not to refresh but to ridicule. The thirst would become intolerable and the only relief offered was undrinkable.¹⁰

Jewish sensitivities about the sabbath made them approach Pilate and request the removal of the bodies of the executed before sunset. This ran counter to the normal procedure, but the request was granted. To hasten death, possibly by making it impossible for the condemned to relieve the pressure on their hands and chests by supporting themselves on their nailed feet, or possibly simply to impose one final climactic session of suffering, the Jewish authorities asked that the legs of the prisoners be broken (John 19:31). In Jesus' case, however, they were too late. After the two thieves crucified with Jesus had their legs smashed, the soldiers discovered that Jesus was already dead. So instead they 'pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out' (John 19:34).

Burial followed. Although the full burial procedure was not carried out, the body of Jesus was wrapped in linen cloths along with 'about a hundred pounds' of a mixture of myrrh and aloes. So the body of the dead Jesus was laid on a stone shelf in a stone tomb, where it remained.

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS?

In 1 Corinthians 1-2, Paul wrote about his preaching. Although his message was regarded as foolishness by the Greek philosophical mind and as a scandal by the Jewish religious mind, Paul declared that he 'decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). Elsewhere, in the face of those who were determined to 'glory' in the way they had maintained contemporary Jewish rules and taught others to do so, he had said, 'May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world' (Gal. 6:14).

If we admit that crucifixion was a horrible death, and was regarded as such even by those who used it against others, then why should we 'glory in the cross'? The answer to that lies in the nature of the gospel which the early Christians preached.

Humanly, Jesus, like so many before and after him, was a failure. He came and preached to Israel and although many 'believed in him' their belief, their faith (the same Greek word is used for both), was either not genuine at all or was quite defective. In the end, 'they all forsook him, and fled' (Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50). This had been anticipated previously when Jesus, having fed a large crowd with five loaves and two fish, told them that eternal life depended on them eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John 6:53-57). Many turned away from him when he said that. Finally they all turned away.

So why did some return, and even more, why did they enthusiastically spread the news of his death? The answer is simple.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,⁴ and that he was buried, and that *he was raised on the third day* in accordance with the scriptures,⁵ and that *he appeared to Cephas, then to the*

¹⁰ Mark's account has 'wine mixed with myrrh', possibly indicating that the wine was intended as an anaesthetic. However, in Jesus' determination to endure the sufferings set for him (Mark 10:34, 38) with full consciousness, he refused it.

twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

They did not preach about a dead Messiah but they proclaimed that Jesus, the man who had died and been buried was now alive and that they had met him! Peter, the one who, only a few weeks previously, had vehemently denied even knowing him, stood up at the festival of Pentecost and said ‘This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses’ (Acts 2:32). Later he told Cornelius

We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (Acts 10:39-41).

Resurrection may be the ‘correct’ thing to say about Jesus in Christian circles today, but it was hardly ‘correct’ then. Many had seen, spoken with, eaten with and even touched the same Jesus who had been crucified, who had died and who had been buried! They proclaimed ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10, 33; 17:18 etc).

However, even if we could ‘prove’ the reality of Jesus’ resurrection, that would still hardly be foolishness or a scandal. On the contrary, it might even be a cause of amazement, on a similar though grander scale to those, say, who claim to have ‘died’ in surgery. We might ask, ‘What was it like?’ or something like that. And, accepting that Jesus did rise from the dead, why should anyone ‘glory’ in the means of his death? Given the vast supply of crosses in jewellery and grave markers and so on, we would have to say that the mere existence of a cross, whether sanitised for wearing or more closely identified with death, does not provoke much of a response.¹¹ Obviously, there must be a lot more to be said.

WHY THE CROSS?

We might possibly be offended by the hideous nature of crucifixion but, in an age when computers and other technologies can mimic real suffering or present it in acceptable ways, there are many, even in our comfortable cultures, for whom the discussion of pain and torture and death means little. But the New Testament, as we have seen, says very little about that aspect. Instead it speaks to the moral and not the emotional heart of men and women.

The word of the cross is not an appeal to our sentiment: ‘See how he loved you, will you not respond?’ Of course the cross was the expression of love, and there are many statements in scripture which attest to that, but the word of the cross concerns *holy* love. As such the word of the cross first speaks to the conscience.

The whole message of the scriptures is built around the moral structure of creation and of mankind. Man is made in the image of God and, if nothing else, that involves every human being in holiness and purity and righteousness and truth. Men and women are created to reflect *actively* the whole dynamic of God’s moral being. To be

¹¹ This would not be the case in cultures which have quite positive views of the correctness of their own religions, such as in Islamic countries.

truly human is to live in the holiness of God, to be pure in all things, to be completely consistent with God's being and character. That is truth, things as they really are because that is how God is. And, what is more, all these elements of human life are energised in the wonder of *knowing* God, so that these elements are not our own but always his life in us. God is the fountain of living waters and we are *being* his image when the fountain flows into us and through us. We are *being* in the image of God when we love in the love which flows from him.

What we call 'the fall' of Man is not simply a matter of rebellion against an instruction not to eat of a particular fruit in Eden. It was, and is, a deep rejection of God as Father, Creator and King, and as Redeemer, and so a rejection of the true nature of a human being. In place of true human nature, men and women attempt to construct their own identities and to generate their own 'flow'. The effort is tragic, because they are digging out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. All the efforts are doomed to fail, if for no other reason than that human beings cannot be other than what they were created to be.

But the efforts do not only fail because of some inherent weakness in them. They fail because God himself cannot and will not permit them to succeed. His blessing upon men and women and upon the creation is withheld and his curse comes upon those who refuse him. The ground is cursed (Gen. 3:17) and the creation subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it (Rom. 8:20).

God's holiness, which is his own being, cannot be set aside. Unless holiness acts against unholiness then God is denying himself, something he cannot do (2 Tim. 2:13). This action against unholiness, against evil, against sin, is his wrath and his wrath is 'revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth' (Rom. 1:18). God is personally against all sin and so against all those who oppose themselves to him.

This wrath is fearsome. Romans 1:18-31, for instance, tells us of God handing rebellious humanity over to its own choices with degrading consequences. Twice in that passage, Paul specifies that the sinful mind is affected: 'they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened' (v. 21) and 'God gave them up to a debased mind' (v. 28). To the Colossians he wrote that men and women are 'hostile in mind' (1:21) and then to Titus that 'To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted' (1:15). They are given up to self-deception. And all these statements go on to say that where the mind is debased then only debased actions can issue.

'Debased' does not mean that a human being has reached the limits of evil behaviour, as the list in Romans 1:28-31 shows.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.²⁹ They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

But it does mean that humanity is given over to 'every kind of wickedness'. To the Ephesians Paul wrote that, apart from the revelation which God gives of himself, Gentiles are

darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (Eph. 4:18-19)

We should see that the source of this evil lies in the human heart.

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder; ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:21-23)

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. (James 3:16)

The fact of evil being immeasurably evil is not readily admitted. Sin is deceitful.

Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Isa. 5:20)

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23)

In Israel, the depths of evil were present. Apart from the revelation of God's holiness, Israel could never see that even its worship had become fatally polluted.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isa. 6:1-5)

Isaiah was forced to recognise the depths of his own and Israel's evil and the great wrath which that evil drew upon them: 'I am lost!'

What is more, the testimony is that God has not been precipitous, or quickly bad tempered, in his judgment.

You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right. (Ps. 119:137)

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Ex. 34:6-7).

However, this is not an attempt to justify God before those who accuse him. The truth of his judgment is first known in the conscience as men and women are forced to know that their hatred of God, in will and action, has brought this upon them. The deeper agony lies in the refusal to come in simple repentance.

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. (Ps 130:3-4)

Over against that is the persistent refusal to accept responsibility for sin, so that men and women live self-deceived lives and so suffer the action of God's wrath.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is *no deceit*. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. (Ps 32:2-4).

Continuously humanity attempts to salve the demands of a troubled conscience. But being in the image of God, men and women cannot be satisfied and at peace unless they are functionally one with the truth of God. Or as someone put it, nothing can

satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God. Consequently, self-justification cannot succeed, since self justification, the rationalisation which says that I can deal with my guilt by my actions and attitudes, always has to minimise the offence done to the holiness of God. Self-justification says that I have to deal with me, hence the absurd statement that I have to forgive myself. But the psalmist says to God,

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. (Ps. 51:4)

The assumption that I must forgive myself is based on the foolish premise that the wrath to be feared is my own. On the contrary, 'God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day' (Ps. 7:11 *NIV*).

While ever God's holiness remains unsatisfied, that is, while ever sin remains unjudged and wrath has not destroyed evil, men and women remain in fearful bondage.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE CROSS?

Many passed by the cross of Christ. Some may have been friends and family of the two thieves who were crucified alongside of Christ. Certainly Jesus' enemies were there, their mouths open wide 'like a ravening and roaring lion' (Ps. 22:13). They were present in their triumph; they crucified him (see Acts 2:36 etc).

But it is more certain that the enemies of Jesus, while expressing their vicious hatred of him, were doing nothing beyond the plan of God. They had been given up to their evil and, in that, they were bringing about the climactic judgment of that evil.

this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. (Acts 2:23)

It was not the wrath of Man that was the effective cause of the cross of Christ but the wrath of God. Such statements as these are stark:

[Christ Jesus] whom *God* put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Romans 3:25).

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32).

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, *struck down by God*, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. ...¹⁰*Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.* (Isaiah 53:4-6, 10)

It might be harrowing for us to see the crucifixion of a human being, to hear the awful cries of pain and to watch as death claims another victim. But that is not the cross of Christ. His death was not that of *a* man but the death of all humanity. There the words of Lamentations 1:12 are fulfilled.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.

Here is the judgment on humanity. Here it is the man Jesus, the last Adam, crying out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). He is the propitiation for our sins, meaning that he is the one given to bear the wrath of God so that we might be free from it. Here is the wrath which satisfies the offended conscience of God. Here is the judgment which can never be understood until it is known in its purifying power.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Rom. 5:8-9)

how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14)

Christ has fulfilled all righteousness. The judgment is finished and we must simply *receive* that. The guilt has been destroyed in the winepress of God's wrath. Will we receive that? 'Here is love, vast as the ocean'; will we receive such *holy* love which cannot rest until the unholy are made holy and pure in the blood of Christ. And will we move beyond the sentimental into the action of the redeemed? Until we will do that, we have never understood the cross of Christ.

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| 1. ALAS! and did my Saviour bleed ?
And did my Sovereign die ?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I ? | 4. Thus might I hide my blushing face
While His dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes to tears. |
| 2. Was it for sins that I had done
He groaned upon the tree ?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree! | 5. But drops of grief can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe
Here, Lord, I give myself away:
'Tis all that I can do. |
| 3. Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut his glories in,
When Christ, the mighty Maker, died
For man, the creature's sin. | <i>Isaac Watts (1674-1748)</i> |