

What Does the Cross Mean To You?

Good Friday, April 2, 2021

Pastor Jeremy Cagle

There is a line in that song: "I'll cherish the old, rugged cross until my trophies at last I lay down." To be thinking about it is kind of an ironic line because as a Christian, you don't really have any trophies except for the cross. When it comes to getting into heaven when it comes to being forgiven with God, when it comes to having your sins paid for, the only thing you have is the cross you have nothing else. When you stand before God, and God says, "Why should I let you into heaven?", you will present Him nothing but the cross of Jesus Christ. That's it. That's what we're here to talk about this morning. This morning, we're here to celebrate one of the most important days in our year as a Christian, one of the most important days in the calendar. And that's Good Friday, the day that Jesus died. Easter is the day that He rose, Easter is the day that He came back to life. We'll be celebrating that in a few days, but Friday is the day that He went into the grave, the day that His life ended.

It's kind of strange to call it Good Friday, because if you were there watching it in the first century, you would not have called it that. It's not a good thing to crucify a man. But we call it that because of all the results that come from it. And just to say a few words about that, if you want to open your bibles to John, chapter 19. That's the passage we're going to be looking at. I have a few words to say first before we get there but if you want to open in John chapter 19. You know, we don't think about this much today but it's hard to explain how repulsive the cross was to a first century audience, it's hard to explain how ugly it was, because it's not ugly to us anymore. We've lost a sense of that. To us, the cross is a thing of beauty. It's a work of art. We have crosses around our necks. We sing songs about the cross, like we just did. We have crosses on our steeples, crosses everywhere. But nobody did that in the first century. It had a very different connotation back then.

I did a study on it this week to see how this came about, but early on, shortly after Jesus died, Christians started making the sign of the cross on their forehead. You guys have seen that, right? You've seen different people do that. They would kneel down to pray or read their Bible, and they would do the motion like that. And then after that, they would start drawing crosses on their doorposts or crosses on their tombstones, they would go visit ancient graves and you would see crosses on them. And then in the Middle Ages, after Constantine outlawed crucifixion and banned it from the Empire, monks started using it as a good luck charm. So, if you went into a monastery, they would give you a cross to ward off evil spirits or silence barking dogs. So, some of you have barking dogs in your neighborhood, you didn't know the cross would do that, but that's what they did in the Middle Ages, kind of a silly thing. In the crusades, people fought under the banner of the cross, they made a big golden cross, and they would take it with them into battles as a good luck charm. And it got to the point that one scholar said it wasn't long before the whole world was full of crosses, it wasn't long before they were everywhere you look; they became very commonplace, to the point that we lost the sense of how horrible it was to die like this; to the point that we lost the sense of how repulsive the cross truly was. One author said this, he said, "Jesus was not crucified in a church between two candles, he was crucified on a cross between two thieves, and it was

ugly, very ugly.” Which is why we need to talk about that this morning. And if you would look in the passage that we have before us in John 19, down in verse 16, it says this. It says,

So, Pilate then handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. And they took Jesus therefore and He went out bearing His own cross to the place called the place of a skull which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, and there they crucified Him.

If you've ever heard a Good Friday Sermon before you've probably studied this passage, but it says that after arresting Jesus and putting Him on trial and flogging Him or scourging Him, John says that they crucified Him. If you notice, he actually says it twice in this passage for emphasis once in verse 16 and once in verse 18, to say that they crucified Him. Can you believe it? They crucified Him. They made Him bear His own cross to the place of a skull called Golgotha and there they killed Him there. We read that and don't think twice about it, but it would have sent chills down the spine of the original audience because they knew what it meant to do this, the people reading this in the first century had seen people crucified, so they knew what this is describing. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, crucifixion was invented by the Persians in the sixth century BC to punish their enemies. Then it was picked up by Alexander the Great, and then it was perfected by the Romans. And Herodotus actually uses that term, he says it was perfected by them. In other words, the Romans made this as horrible as it could be.

I read this to our church some years ago, when we were going through the gospel of John, but Alexander Metherell was a research scientist for the University of California who has written extensively on the subject of crucifixion and he has an interesting perspective on this because he talks about the medical side of it, what it would have looked like and so he says this, I just want to read this to you at length, he says the victim would have carried the vertical bar of the cross or sorry, the horizontal bar of the cross called the patibulum to the place of execution. Once there, he would have been laid down on the ground and nailed to it on the vertical beam called the patibulum and would have been permanently set in the ground. The Romans used spikes that were five to seven inches long and taper to a sharp point and they were driven through the wrist about an inch or two below the palm. This was a solid position that would lock the hand. If the nails had been driven through the palm, the weight would have caused the skin to tear, and he would have fallen off the cross. It's important to understand that the nail would go through the place called the median or where the median nerve runs. This is the largest nerve going out to the hand and it would be crushed by the nail that was pounded into it. It says, do you know the pain you feel when you hit your funny bone? That's another nerve called the ulnar nerve. It's extremely painful when you hit it. It's hard to...well, imagine taking a pair of pliers and squeezing that nerve until it was crushed. That is the kind of pain you would experience on the cross. And he goes on here, and I just want to quote this to you because it's important to understand what this was like. Again, we've forgotten a sense of this. But he says the pain was unbearable. At this point Jesus was hoisted as the cross bearer was attached to the vertical stake, and then nails were driven through his feet. Again, the nerves in his feet would have been crushed, and there would have been a similar type of pain. The arms would immediately be stretched, probably about six inches in length, and both shoulders would have become dislocated, you can determine that with simple mathematical equations. And once a person is hanging in this position, crucifixion is essentially a death by suffocation. And the reason is that the stress on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhale position. So, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet and so doing, the nail will tear through the foot, eventually locking up the tarsal bones. You would have to rub against that bone over and over again to stay alive. And this would go on until complete exhaustion would take over and the person would eventually suffocate.

It was a horrible way to die. It may have been the worst form of death ever invented. In fact, it was so bad that they had to invent a new word to describe it. It's the word *excrucio*, it means out of the cross. You guys have had excruciating pain before, pain that was too bad for words. That's where the word comes from. The cross was so terrible that they had to actually invent a word to describe it: excruciating. And you would hang there for days there are accounts of men hanging there for a week or so before they eventually died. And the question that comes to my mind anyway, as I hear about that is, what was it like if you were there? What would it be like to witness someone die this way? That's what John talks about in his gospel. In his accounts of the crucifixion, John doesn't say much about the cross itself, because it's already been talked about in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So, what John focuses on is the reaction of the people that were watching this. He focuses on the people themselves. And he asked the question, what did they do with it? Did they believe in Jesus as the Messiah? Did they believe in Him as the Son of God?

The gospel of John was written so that you may believe and so that's the question in John's mind. How do people respond to that? And to answer that this morning, we're going to talk about three responses to the cross from the people who were actually there. So, if you're taking notes, that's our outline for this morning. If your hands are cold, taking notes is a wonderful way to keep your hands warm, just to say, but three responses to the cross from those who are actually there. And we're going to tie this into our lives today because I want us to think about how do we respond to the cross? How do we react to that this morning? You know, at this point in the Gospel, Jesus has been betrayed and arrested and put on trial. He's been flogged and forced to wear a crown of thorns and a purple robe. The whole drama is played out to the point that now He's about to be executed. Now He's about to be killed. And how do people respond to that? Let's talk about three responses. The first one is His enemies. The first group of people that respond to the cross in John's Gospel are His enemies or the soldiers who are crucifying Him.

In order to crucify a man in the first century, you had to have soldiers, you had to have professionals do it for you because it was too messy and intricate of a process. You had to have some hired thugs and in verse 23 it describes them this way. By the way, this shows you how different their world was from ours because our soldiers don't do this. But if you look in verse 23, it describes these guys this way. And it says,

Then the soldiers when they had crucified Jesus, took His outer garments and made four parts, a part to every soldier, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece and so they said to one another, let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to decide whose it shall be. This was to fulfill the Scripture, "they divided my outer garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots". Therefore, the soldiers did these things.

And just a few comments on this, but if you remember, Chapter 18 says that Judas brought a cohort of Roman soldiers with him to arrest Jesus, and that refers to a detachment of 600 men. A Roman cohort would have been about 600 men. So, this is interesting because it goes from 600 down to four; in verse 23 there's four guys at the cross. Six hundred took Him to trial, but now there's four left over to crucify Him. Luke 23 also says there was a centurion there, which is a commander of 100 men, so there may have been more than that standing around the cross but right at the cross itself, there's four guys. And if you notice, what are they doing, it says they're dividing up His clothes. Clothes were very expensive back then, and not as cheap as they are today. So, it was the custom at the time for the executioner to keep the victim's clothes as part of his payment. Crucifixion was a death of humiliation, so they would crucify you naked back then; they would take your clothes off to embarrass you any

way they could, so they took Jesus clothes here. In verse 23 it says it was in one piece, and so they didn't want to tear it so they cast lots for it. A lot was a piece of wood or bone that had some markings on it, you could gamble with it; kind of like a piece of dice. Basically, there as Jesus is dying and gasping for His last breaths, they're rolling dice, they're having a party. Verse 24 says God had a higher purpose in this. This was to fulfill scripture. But the point is, these soldiers didn't care. They didn't care at all about Jesus. That's how they responded to the cross. That's how they reacted to it. It had no effect on them whatsoever. Matthew even says they sat down; they didn't even think it was worthy to stand up. Jesus was just another death to them. They'd seen men crucified before, so He was just another victim. And I wonder if there's anyone here today who feels the same way about the cross. If this is just another story to you, if this is just another death. It's a sad story, very sad, very tragic, but it's nothing more to you. You hear all this talk about the cross and you say that's nice, but when do we get to eat? You hear all this talk about death and the pain, and the humiliation and you say, well, I've heard that before, when do I get to have dinner? Some of you may be apathetic and the word apathetic means you have no pathos you have no emotion to this. It's a very dangerous thing to grow up in church or to be in church every day because the church is full of people; it's full of apathetic Christians because these stories don't impact us anymore. You talk to some professing Christians about sports, and they get excited. You talk to them about politics, and they get worked up. You talk about the government and the restrictions and all this, and they have all this reaction, but you talk about the cross, and you get nothing. No feeling at all.

If you think about it, these guys, these soldiers, you'd have to be hard hearted, to watch a man be crucified and not care anymore, you would have to have a very hard heart. And that's what these guys had. Some of us could be like that today. You can hear sermons; you can do Bible studies and it doesn't impact you. And you don't want to be like that this morning. You know, you don't want to be like the woman who said that she came to church because it's a great place to take a nap. Or like the man who said, you know, I go to church for my wife, she needs it, but I don't. She needs this help but not me, I'm fine. You don't want to respond like the soldiers. They're the worst group in the list. John starts off with the zeros in the story. These guys are the zeros. The ones you don't imitate, and he moves on to a next response to the cross from the people who were actually there. So, the first one is His enemies, those who don't care about Him. Second one is His friends. If you're taking notes, the second people that respond to the cross are His friends. And they're very different from that, they have a very different response. If you look in verse 25, it says, "Therefore the soldiers did these things, but standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."

This passage starts off with the word "but" to make a contrast here, it says, "Therefore, the soldiers did these things." They cast lots, they didn't care, but standing by the cross were all these people, these other figures. Before I tell you who they are, it might help to say there were four women and one man standing by the cross. And that's it. That's all you see here. There were times in Jesus' ministry when He had 1000s of people following Him, right? Remember when He fed the 5000? Thousands of people were there to eat the bread and to take the loaves. Where are they now? They're gone. He also had 12 disciples, right? 12 men followed Him everywhere He went. Now He's got four, or five, excuse me, four of them are women. Some of Jesus' bravest followers were women. It would have taken a lot of courage to do this, it would have taken a lot of bravery. But it says Jesus' mother was there, along with His mother's sister. Both Matthew and Mark say that this was Salome, the mother of John. So, John's mother was standing there along with Jesus' mother, along with Mary, the wife of Clopas. Clopas is another way of saying Alphaeus, who was a disciple of Jesus. So, a disciple's mother's there and the disciple is not there. There were three mothers standing here, three women in the twilight of life. At a time when most people retire, at a time when most people stay home and take it easy, they're doing this. And then there was Mary

Magdalene, who we don't know much about. Luke says that Jesus cast seven demons out of her. The verse 26 says, the disciple whom Jesus loved was there. It's another way of saying, John. So, John was the only disciple who decided to stick around at the cross. But the point is that these people cared, didn't they? Jesus meant something to them. They cared deeply. In fact, to highlight this, verse 25, says they were standing by the cross. So, while the soldiers are sitting, these people are standing. While the soldiers did nothing, they're just gambling and messing around, these people tried to help. A crucified person was typically would hang three feet off the ground, so their feet would be three feet off the ground, which means that if you're standing, you could reach out and touch them. If you're standing, you could reach out and support them that way. You may not be able to do much, but you can do something. Standing is also in the continuous tense in Greek, which means this is ongoing. They were continually doing this. They kept standing through the whole thing. As long as Jesus hung on the cross, these people were there. Which means that what He went through, they went through; what He experienced, they experienced in part. I didn't mention this earlier, but people would often throw things at a crucified person. One reason they crucified you that way is because you couldn't do anything to help yourself. You couldn't do anything to stop the abuse, so the crowds would throw rocks and filth and dead animals at you and they would taunt you. Matthew 27, verse 42, says that they taunted Jesus by saying, you know, He saved others, but He cannot save Himself. But these people standing around the cross felt that and heard all of it, they experienced it with Him, probably got hit by some of the flying objects. The names probably got noticed by the authorities because Jesus was being crucified by the government of Rome. But the point is, when they said they believed Jesus, they meant it, when they said they would follow Him, they meant it. They were going to follow Him anywhere, anywhere. They weren't just there to party; they weren't just there to have the fish and the loaves; they were there to have the cross too. You know, it's been said, there are three types of believers in the church, there are true believers, there are unbelievers, and then there are make believers. There are people that just want to fake it. These people weren't doing that. They weren't faking it at all. It's also been said that a hypocrite is a Christian until it costs them something. This cost these people everything. These are the people you want to imitate. These are the people you want to copy in your life. Listen, you guys aren't sitting in a tent this morning and freezing to death because this doesn't mean something to you. You're not out here in such an uncomfortable place because you don't care, you guys care. That's why you're here.

This is the kind of group you want to be. These are the kinds of people that their Christianity lasts during a pandemic, amen? These are the kinds of people that their Christianity lasts through the restrictions. They don't give it up. You know, in Luke 9, Jesus made a very telling statement about this. But in Luke 9, verse 23, He said, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily". And the reason He said you must take up your cross, is because He's going to take it up, and you've got to take it up too. He's going to march to the cross, you have to march with Him. You can't stop halfway; you can't stop when it gets uncomfortable. And this brings us to one more group of people that were at the cross with Jesus.

Just to review some of these other ones. You know, we've seen the response to the soldiers or Jesus enemies, and how they didn't care. They just gambled and cast lots for His clothes. And then we've seen the response of His friends, four women and one man, three mothers at the twilight of life in their later years; and one apostle, apostle John. That leads us to one more response to the crucifixion, one more set of high witnesses, and that is Jesus' undertakers. This is an interesting group here, but a third group is the third response to Jesus, it's the response of His undertaker's or the men who buried Him. Because as you know, if you've read the Gospels before, the story doesn't end when He dies. The story doesn't end when He's on the cross and breathes His last breath, it continues after that.

There's a lot of events that happen after Jesus' soul leaves His body. Just to talk about that a little bit in verse 28, it tells us that after saying, "I'm thirsty", or "It is finished", Jesus dies. Verse 30 actually says that He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit. Jesus would say seven things from the cross, He would say seven final words and some of you may know we talked about those last Good Friday, so a year ago today, we actually went through those seven sayings on the cross, I preached that from a cemetery in Chilliwack. We thought that would be very appropriate. You can go see that online. But if you notice, there's nothing despairing in this statement here. There's nothing discouraging because when the Lord says it is finished, it has an exclamation mark on it. Because this was a cry of triumph, it was not a cry of defeat.

Crucifixion was a death of suffocation. So, Jesus is suffocating, He's running out of air, and He shouts this as He dies. And to make sure that He was dead, the story goes on to say Pilate wanted to break His legs and verses 31 through 35 talk about that. I won't read that for the sake of time, but it could take days to crucify a man, it could take a long time so Pilate, knowing the Passover is coming up, he wants to speed it up. So, he decided to break Jesus' legs. But as the soldiers get there, they notice He's already dead. By the way, they would break your legs because in order to breathe, they would push up on your legs, so they broke your leg bones right at the shin area, couldn't do that anymore, you would just suffocate and die. And so, the soldiers go to do that, and they see that He's already dead. But to make sure, verse 33 says that they pierced His side with a spear. He would have been up on the cross hanging up here, and so the spear would have come at an angle this way. I actually asked one of our doctors about this. And they told me that when someone dies, their blood can clot up in the heart and separate into chambers, allowing other things like serum to creep in, and maybe a little water. So, there's a physical explanation to this, but when they pierced His heart, blood and water flowed out literally, or blood and a watery serum type of substance. But the point here that John is making is that He was dead. The soldiers saw Him dead. Pilate found out He was dead. Even though they didn't break His legs, His soul had left His body.

And to prove it even more, John tells you how they buried Him. You don't bury a live person you bury a dead one. And if you look in verse 38, this is the account of His burial. It says,

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus and Pilate granted permission. So, he came and took away his body. And Nicodemus, who had first come to him by night also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes about 100 pounds of weight. So, they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where He was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden, a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. And therefore, because of the Jewish day of preparation since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

The day of preparation there is a reference to the Sabbath. Jesus was crucified on a Friday, He rose on Sunday, but in between there was a Sabbath, Jewish day of rest, when the Jews aren't supposed to do any work, and so if they were going to bury Him, it would have to be a quick thing, a hastily done thing. And it says, Joseph of Arimathea did this. He's not mentioned before in the Gospel of John, but the other gospels tell us he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which is the group that crucified Jesus, it's a group that voted to put Him to death. So, you want to talk about a man in a tight place, conflict of interest; he's part of a group that votes to crucify Him and then the next day he buries Him. And then, it mentions Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night if you remember that story. And Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God". And that

made such an impression on Nicodemus, it had such an impact on him that he comes back, and he buries Him like this. Verse 41 says they put Him in a new tomb. Crucified, people were typically thrown into mass graves at the time, or they were burned in the Valley of Gehenna. So, the two men that were crucified next to Jesus would have been tossed out and then forgotten like trash. But Jesus was buried like this. And then the whole history of crucifixion Jesus was probably the only person that was ever crucified and buried in a brand-new tomb. Never... you didn't do that. Oftentimes the crucified person, their body was left on the cross to rot and be eaten by vultures.

Verse 39 also says Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 100 pounds weight. That would have been an enormous amount to put on a person; ointments and spices to keep the body from smelling. 100 pounds worth is about the weight of a person, this would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, just as a tomb probably would have cost something like that. In other words, this was a burial fit for a king, because that's how they looked at Jesus. That's how these guys viewed Him. They viewed Him as their king. They thought He was the Messiah. They buried Him like a God because that's how they viewed Him. This was an act of worship because that was their response. And we can look at the way other people responded to this. Other examples like the centurion, who said, "Surely this man was the Son of God", but he didn't do anything about it. Or we could look at the crowd who wept and beat their breasts. But they didn't do anything either. And it raises the question, you know, as we've read this, friends, which one of these are you? As we've looked at this response and talked about what Jesus did on the cross? Which one of these can you relate to?

John's not giving you a story just to give you a story. He's not painting you a picture, just so you can look at it and say, Oh, how nice. He wants to know, what's your response to this? Which one of these groups are you? Are you like the soldiers who said it's no big deal? I don't care. When do we get to eat lunch? Or are you like the friends who stayed with Him until the end, even though it cost them something? Are you like the centurion who said, "Surely this man was the Son of God", but I'm not going to do anything about it? Are you like the undertakers who treated Him like a king? Where do you see yourself in this gospel? You know, it's one thing to talk about these things. here under a tent, it's another thing to take them home with you. It's one thing to discuss it on Good Friday, but it's another thing to do it on Saturday and Sunday and Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday. What is your response to the cross?

In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott says that one of the oldest surviving pictures of a cross comes from a painting on a house in Rome. It dates back to the second century, about 100 years after Jesus died, and someone drew it on the wall, as a joke, they drew it as a piece of graffiti. Because on the painting, we see the body of a man being crucified with the head of a donkey, it had the head of a farm animal on it. And underneath it, there's another man with his arms outstretched in prayer. And the words, {Greek} under it, which means "Alexamenos worships his God", because the idea of worshipping a crucified man was so stupid to the Romans, it was so foolish that they compared it to worshipping a donkey. They compared it to worshipping a mule. My friends, I tell you that the world thinks that what we do is stupid, don't they? They think that what we do is foolish. Meeting outside, meeting under a tent, why would you do something like that? It's because you worship a God like this. That's what we're here to celebrate. We worship a crucified man; we worship a crucified Savior. We treat Him like our king, because that's what He is. He's our Messiah, He paid for all our sins. As the song says, I owe the debt I could not pay. He paid a debt He did not owe. Friends, do you believe that this morning? Do you believe Jesus paid all your debts? If you do, you have no choice but to respond, like the believers did in the first century. And let me pray for you that you would this morning. Let me pray that God would take our worship and be glorified in it.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you, Lord, for this story, this true story of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. How He came to the cross, how He was beaten and bloodied, and crucified for our sins. And as we celebrate the Lord's table this morning, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, and remember that, Father, would you be glorified? Thank you for the believers who came before us. Thank you for people like those that stood at the cross. For the men who buried our Savior, for those who set the way for us today. May we imitate their faith. May they be our heroes. The world would look at them and despise them. The world would look at them and laugh but we don't laugh. They're in heaven now and no one's laughing at them in heaven. We want to go there with them and trust in Christ. Father, would you be glorified as we remember what Jesus has done now in this ordinance, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen