



The Cross

The Roman Symbol of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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When it comes to the Gospel, the Bible gives three symbols that help us understand what Jesus did for us – the veil, the cross, and the cornerstone.

The veil is the Jewish symbol of our faith. The temple veil reminded people that God was holy, and they were not. It was a physical barrier separating sinful man from holy God. Yet, the moment Jesus died on the cross, the veil was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that we now have access to God.

The cross, of course, is the sacred symbol of our faith. Yes, it's odd that a Roman tool for execution became the symbol of our faith, yet we proudly identify with the cross. We display it, we wear it, and we decorate with it, because it is through the cross that we find salvation and eternal life. As Paul said, we "boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹

The cornerstone symbolizes the foundation of our faith. Because of His victorious resurrection, Jesus is that cornerstone.² There is salvation in no other name. He is our salvation and the only reliable foundation upon which to build our lives.

The veil, the cross, and the cornerstone are all symbols of the Gospel. So during this Easter season, we're looking at what these three symbols teach us about what Jesus did for us.

The cross is the sacred symbol of our faith. The earliest Christians, however, avoided the cross as a symbol.³ It was too feared and too gruesome. On the walls of the catacombs – those underground caves where Christians gathered and also buried their dead – were other symbols.⁴ Such as a peacock as a symbol of immortality, a dove as a symbol of peace, and an anchor as a symbol of hope.⁵ And there was the secret symbol of the fish. The Greek word for fish is *ιχθυς*, and was an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior."⁶ If there was a fish etched on the door of a person's house, others would secretly know that person was a Christian.

Again, it's odd that a Roman tool for execution became the symbol of our faith, yet as Paul said, "We boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). But to many, it is foolishness. The thought of nails and blood is barbaric. Why would anyone base their religion on that?!

One reason I am passionate about accurately teaching what the Bible says about the cross is the rise of liberal/progressive theology in America today which dilutes and denies the true Gospel. I am obligated and compelled to declare the truth!

Richard Rohr is the guru of modern, liberal/progressive theology. Rohr is a former Franciscan monk and author of 45 bestsellers. His theology is a blending of Christianity, Eastern mysticism, and ancient wisdom. His fans include Oprah, Bono, and Melinda Gates, as well as an increasing number of pastors and churches across America.

Why is Richard Rohr so popular? Because he makes the Gospel more palatable to a modern world, presenting a Gospel that is void of sin and repentance, and void of sacrifice and the cross. Rohr quotes the Bible and uses familiar theological language but redefines that language into something unrecognizable to biblical Christianity.

Rohr separates Jesus from Christ, teaching that Jesus was just a man who taught us to love but is not the Christ.⁷ The Christ is not a person, but a cosmic spirit into which we merge as we grow in wholeness and in love for others.

According to Richard Rohr and liberal/progressive theology, there is no need for some barbaric death to save us. The notion that someone's death 2,000 years ago could do anything for us today is absurd.⁸ So the cross is seen as "unnecessary violence ... ridiculous and absurd."⁹ Another liberal/progressive pastor calls for the rejection of atonement theology – the belief that Jesus died as a substitute for our sins – and vehemently declares, "I cannot and will not worship a God who demands a blood sacrifice for sin."^{10,11}

This is one reason why I am passionate about accurately teaching what the Bible says about the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1, the Apostle Paul explained why he believed in the foolishness of the cross.

¹⁸"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who do not believe and headed for destruction. But to us, who do believe and are being saved, it is the power of God.

¹⁹The Lord said in the Scriptures, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.' ²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish.

²¹God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom. Instead, he used the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand miracles and Greeks search for wisdom.

²³So when we preach Christ was crucified, Jews are offended and Greeks say it's nonsense. ²⁴But to those called by God to salvation, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man" (1 Corinthians 1:18-25, MW).

To many, the cross is foolishness. But to us, the cross means forgiveness and grace, and thank God for His amazing grace.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE CROSS?

Ours is a post-resurrection faith. We live on this side of the resurrection. So why go back to the cross? German theologian Martin Hengel answers that question in his definitive work on the crucifixion, insisting that we must reflect on "the harsh reality of crucifixion" in order to "overcome the acute loss of reality."¹² Where there is loss of reality, loss of the reality of Jesus'

suffering, there is loss of reverence! So, as we reflect on the six hours Jesus hung on the cross, may it awaken our sense of reverence.¹³

So, let's go back to Calvary and look at what happened at the cross.

The Romans used the cross as a visual deterrent to crime. Crosses lined the busy roads coming into Jerusalem as a visual threat of what would happen to those who broke the law.¹⁴ In Rome, Nero enjoyed strolling around his garden in the evening, which was lit by torching crucified bodies planted around his garden.¹⁵ One popular Greek play included a mock crucifixion. Performed over and over, the play became boring. So the emperor Domitian ordered that a real crucifixion be included to make the play more exciting.¹⁶ When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Roman general Titus ordered so many crucifixions that historians say there were "not enough crosses for the bodies."¹⁷ Crucifixion was barbaric, and the Romans used it to threaten people into submission.

Matthew 27 describes what it was like for Jesus.

Before Jesus was crucified, Pilate ordered that He be "scourged."¹⁸ Jesus was tied to a whipping post and the torture commenced by two soldiers called lictors. These lictors alternated strokes by flogging Jesus with a short whip called a flagrum, which had braided leather strips that were tipped with pieces of metal or bone. Each stroke lacerated Jesus' flesh – His back, His buttocks, His legs. The wounds were deep. The pain was searing. The blood was flying.

Then "the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him."¹⁹ Up to 500 ruthless soldiers gathered around Jesus for entertainment and their sport was sadistic. "They stripped Him." The Son of God was naked, exposed, and humiliated.

They "put a scarlet robe on Him, and twisted together a crown of thorns and pressed it on His head, and put a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'"²⁰ The robe, the crown, and the reed were meant to mock His claim to royalty.

"They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head."²¹ "Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads."²² It just kept coming. There was no end to the verbal stoning. They were relentless in their contempt. "After they had mocked Him, they led Him away to crucify Him."²³

It was 9:00 in the morning when the first nail was struck. Archaeological evidence of a first century crucifixion indicates the nails were tapered spikes five to seven inches long.²⁴ These spikes were driven through the wrist, probably not through the hand, to better support the weight of a human body.

Historian Frederick Farrar describes what Jesus endured. "Death by crucifixion included all that pain and death can bring, all that is horrible and ghastly ... dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever ... publicity of shame, long continuance of torment."²⁵ "Every movement painful ... lacerated veins ... crushed tendons ... incessant anguish."²⁶

For six hours, Jesus hung there, aching, throbbing, and groaning. For six hours, He labored for every breath. And after six hours, when He could endure it no longer, He breathed His last.²⁷

At any moment along the way, Jesus could have stopped everything. But He didn't. Why? Because He cared more about saving us than saving Himself.

WHAT DOES THE CROSS MEAN?

The physical act of the cross was so brutal and barbaric, it seems foolish to base one's faith on it. *So, why do we? What does the cross really mean?*

Most of us tend to understate the severity of our sin. Yet, the cross exposes the truth about us. British theologian John Stott wrote, "Our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross."²⁸

The stinging indictment upon humanity is that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). All of us. The Bible says what we already know. "There is no one who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46).

Sin is not a disease or a disorder or a dysfunction. Sin is a choice to rebel against God. When we sin, we declare our independence and snub our noses at His authority. When we sin, we choose self – self-will, self-reliance, self-indulgence. When we sin, we break God's law and bring upon ourselves the consequences of His judgment. When we sin, we miss the mark and fall short of what God desires for us. And sadly, when we sin, we spurn the one who loves us the most, we break His heart, and we offend a holy God.²⁹

Sin is not some misdemeanor. It's not like getting a parking ticket. It's something far worse. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and those who sin against God are "worthy of death" (Romans 1:32).³⁰ What a chilling indictment!

But we don't feel that way. Our sins are not that bad. We admit we're not perfect, but we're good people. Yet the cross tells us something different about ourselves. The cross exposes the severity of our sin.³¹ If that's not true, then God certainly overreacted at the cross. But He did not overreact. Cancer is a severe disease and an aspirin won't help. A severe disease requires a severe treatment, and the severity of our sin required a severe solution.

Yes, it sounds extreme, except that this was the plan and work of God. And according to Isaiah 53:10, the plan of God required the unthinkable. Isaiah 53:10 contains one of the most troubling statements in the Bible.

"It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and make his life an offering for sin" (Isaiah 53:10, NIV). "The Lord was pleased to crush Him" (NAS). But why would God do that? The Hebrew word for "crush" means to break into pieces, to pulverize into dust. Why would God do that to His own Son?

Because the holy justice of God required punishment of sin, and the holy love of God desired forgiveness of sin. The cross is perhaps the clearest picture of who God is. He is both the

judge who condemns us and the sacrifice who saves us. One person wrote, “In the cross of Christ God’s justice and love are simultaneously revealed.”³²

For most of his life Miroslav Volf rejected the notion of God’s wrath, until he witnessed the horrors of the Bosnian War.³³ “I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn’t God love? Shouldn’t divine love be beyond wrath? ... But my thinking was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God *not* being angry ... Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I have to rebel against a God who *wasn’t* wrathful at the sight of the world’s evil ... (I came to realize that) God is wrathful because God is love.”³⁴

As gruesome as it is, the cross teaches us about God’s love. He loves us so much that He did the unthinkable. Romans 8:32 says, He “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (ESV). Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (NAS).³⁵ The cross teaches us about God’s justice and God’s love.³⁶ And the Bible says, “Jesus (was) delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” and was “crucified and killed” (Acts 2:23, ESV). The cross was God’s idea!³⁷ Max Lucado is right when he says, “The hand that held the hammer was the hand of God.”³⁸

“It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (Isaiah 53:10, NIV).³⁹ “The Lord was pleased to crush Him” (NAS). The Lord’s will? Pleased? Yes, the cross was God’s idea because it was the only way to save us! ***Thank God for His amazing grace.***

IT STILL SOUNDS LIKE FOOLISHNESS

But to many, *it still sounds like foolishness*. Paul admitted that. “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who do not believe” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

To the earliest critics, Christianity was considered a “crazy superstition”⁴⁰ and Christians were lampooned for worshiping a crucified criminal and a dead deity.⁴¹ On the wall of a Roman school, a crucified figure was drawn with a donkey’s head.⁴² The inscription includes the name of the child they were mocking. “Alexamenos worships God.” Roman children were taught to despise Christians and make fun of the cross.

Yes, “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who do not believe.” ***Except that it was the plan and work of God.***

To those who say the cross is foolishness, Paul quoted the Lord, who said, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent” (1 Corinthians 1:19).⁴³ God speaks from His throne in heaven humbling the wisdom of the world. Then Paul challenged the experts of his day to come forth and debate God. “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish” (1 Corinthians 1:20). “God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom. Instead, he used the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe

... God chose things the world considers foolish to shame those who think they are wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Historically, anything that science could not explain was attributed to the mystery of God. That’s why He is often called the “god of the gaps.” But the more science explains, many believe there’s less need for God.

That was the belief of Stephen Hawking. Hawking was a giant in the scientific world, a brilliant cosmologist and physicist at the University of Cambridge. His study of black holes led to the theory of singularity, the theory that the universe was spontaneously created from the big bang of a black hole. Hawking became part of pop culture when his book *A Brief History of Time* sold more than 10 million copies. He was confined to a wheelchair most of his life, suffering with ALS. His only means of communication was using his cheek muscle to activate a computer to select letters and words enabling him to speak.

His disability did not deter him from studying the wonder of the universe, and here’s what Stephen Hawking said about God. “Although I cannot move and have to speak through a computer, in my mind I am free. We are each free to believe what we want, and it’s my view that the simplest explanation is that there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization. There is probably no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that I am extremely grateful.”

Billy Graham, on the other hand, held crusades all over the world and preached the Gospel to more people than any other person in history. He was a counselor to 13 presidents. He appeared on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, was interviewed by Larry King, and shared the Gospel with the people like Woody Allen and Muhammad Ali. His life was untainted by scandal, and he never wandered from the cross of Jesus Christ.

In 2018, these two giants passed away – Stephen Hawking and Billy Graham. Think of the contrast of their lives. One looked at the universe and concluded there is no God, the other looked at the universe and concluded there must be a God. Which one was right?

Hawking’s ashes are buried in Westminster Abbey near the graves of Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Before he died, he requested that his famous equation for black holes be put on his gravestone. On Billy Graham’s gravestone is John 14:6, where Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.”

No doubt, Stephen Hawking was a brilliant man. But any explanation of the universe or life or death is incomplete if God is left out. The Bible says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1, ESV). So, who is the fool? The one who believes, or the one who does not?

CONCLUSION

Many may say the cross is foolishness, but this morning, we join Paul in passionately declaring our faith in Jesus Christ. Yes, we believe in the foolishness of the cross, because ...

- The cross shows us that we are guilty, but it also shows us that we are forgiven.
- The cross shows us that we are unworthy, but it also shows us that we are loved.
- The cross shows God's holy wrath toward sin, but it also shows His amazing grace toward us.
- The cross shows us the punishment we deserved, but it also shows us the price Jesus paid so that we might be saved.

The cross may seem foolish to some, but to us, it is the most beautiful symbol in the world. Thank God, thank God, for His amazing grace.

NOTES

¹ See Galatians 6:14. Also 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:2.

² See Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, 1 Peter 2:4-8.

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), page 20.

⁴ The graffiti of the catacombs included scenes from Bible stories that we still teach our children – such as Noah’s ark, Jonah inside the great fish, and Daniel in the lion’s den.

⁵ Stott, page 20.

⁶ In Greek, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ.

⁷ Rohr says that Jesus asked us to follow Him but never asked us to worship Him.

⁸ Rohr asks, “Why would God need a blood sacrifice before God could love what God had created? Is God that needy, unloving, rule-bound, and unforgiving? Once you say it, you see it creates a nonsensical theological notion that is very hard to defend.” [Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation, cac.org, February 12, 2016. Adapted from his book *Things Hidden: Scripture As Spirituality* (Franciscan Media: 2007), pages 200-202.]

⁹ Dr. Jeffrey Frantz, “Beyond Atonement Theology,” <https://progressivechristianity.org>, May 4, 2020. Another common statement of progressive/liberal theology is that a vengeful Father punishing his son for something he did not do wrong is nothing less than “cosmic child abuse.”

¹⁰ Rev. Dawn Hutchings, Pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Newmarket, Canada, “Time to Vaccinate Ourselves Against the Infection of Atonement Theology” It is found at www.progressivechristianity.org, April 2, 2021.”

¹¹ Frantz, “Any God who would will the unspeakable suffering and death of an innocent Jesus on the cross is a monster God.”

¹² Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), page 90.

¹³ Ibid., page 4., The historian Octavius was correct when he said we do not reverence the cross, nor do we worship it. We do, however, worship the one who endured it.

¹⁴ Ibid., page 50.

¹⁵ Ibid., page 26.

¹⁶ Ibid., page 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., page 25-26. See also Stott, page 24. Also *The Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whitson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), The Wars of the Jews, Chapter 11, paragraph 1, page 720.

¹⁸ Matthew 27:26.

¹⁹ Matthew 27:27-28.

²⁰ Matthew 27:28-29.

²¹ Matthew 27:30.

²² Matthew 27:39.

²³ Matthew 27:31.

²⁴ William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; and Floyd E. Hosner, MS, AMI; “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of American Medical Association*, March 21, 1986, Volume 255, page 1459.

²⁵ Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands A Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, Inc., 1972, 1979), quoting Frederick W. Farrar, page 197.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Mark 15:37.

²⁸ Stott, page 83.

²⁹ See Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

³⁰ This is not just physical death. It is spiritual death, spiritual separation from God.

³¹ Gary Thomas dares to say what we need to hear. “The clear teaching of Scripture is that all of us deserve ‘capital punishment.’ ... The fact that anyone will be saved is an act of sheer mercy and compassion on God’s part. We all deserve a spot on death row.” [Gary Thomas, *Authentic Faith: The Power of a Fire-Tested Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), page 244.]

³² Stott, page 131, quoting G. C. Berkouwer. Stott goes on to write on page 159, “The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy.”

³³ Miroslav Volf is the Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at Yale University, and the Founding Director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture.

³⁴ Alisa Childers cites this quote from Volf in her blog, “Is Substitutionary Atonement Just A Type of ‘Cosmic Child Abuse’ that Christians Came Up With in the Middle Ages?” See www.alisachildersblog.com, 3/20/2018. [Original source, Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge – Giving and Forgiving in A Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), pages 138-139.]

³⁵ Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

³⁶ When one denomination was publishing a new denominational hymnal, they requested to include a hymn by Keith Getty, “In Christ Alone.” However, they asked to edit the lyrics to soften the message to align with the denomination’s theology. They wanted to change the lyric “on the cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” to “the love of God was magnified.” Why? Because liberal/progressive theology rejects the notion of God’s holy wrath toward sin.

³⁷ Redemption is a core concept in the Bible. It’s about being forgiven by God and reconciled to Him. Romans 3 uses three words which give three pictures of the Gospel. Romans 3 says we are “*justified* freely by His grace through the *redemption* that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Him as a sacrifice of *atonement*, through faith in His blood” (Romans 3:24-25, NIV).

The first word is **justification**. It's a legal term. The context is a courtroom. Our situation was so severe that we were dragged into court and stood before God our Judge as violators of His law. As we awaited our deserved sentence, something incredible happened. Jesus stood as our advocate. The Bible says, "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense" (1 John 2:1, NIV). Because of His defense, and our faith in Him, we who were guilty are declared not guilty, acquitted, and pardoned.

The second word is **redemption**. It's a commercial term. The context is a marketplace for slaves. Our situation was so severe that it was compared to slavery. The Bible says we were "slaves to sin" (Romans 6:17). One picture of redemption is the payment to free a slave. Another picture is the payment of ransom to free one who has been kidnapped. God was willing to pay a ransom to free us, and that ransom was Jesus. The Bible says He sent His Son "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). That's why Jesus is called our Redeemer. So, to whom did God pay this ransom? Did God have to pay Satan like paying off a kidnapper? No. God paid the ransom to Himself! Who demanded the payment for sin? God did. And who paid for it? God did.

The third word is **atonement**. Atonement, and its rare synonym propitiation, refers to appeasement.³⁷ The context is a temple. In pagan cultures, people would offer extravagant sacrifices to appease their ill-tempered gods. Our God is not ill-tempered, but He is holy.³⁷ And because of our sin, our situation was so severe that we were targets for His holy wrath. The Bible calls us "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). And the Bible insists, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Yet instead of paying with our blood, it was paid "by (Jesus') own blood" (Hebrews 9:12).³⁷ Jesus became our sacrifice, satisfying God's holy wrath and demonstrating God's amazing grace.

Justification – we were violators of God's law, Jesus was our advocate, and we were declared not guilty. Redemption – we were slaves to sin, Jesus was our ransom, and we were freed from bondage. Atonement – we were children of wrath, Jesus was our sacrifice, and we were forgiven of our sin. This is not abstract, theological talk. This is personal. This is what God has done for us. The cross is about substitution. Romans 5:8 says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, **Christ died for us**" (ESV).

³⁸ Max Lucado, *He Choose the Nails* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), page 35.

³⁹ Theologian Wayne Grudem writes, "At the cross the fury of all that stored-up wrath against sin was unleashed against God's own Son." [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, 2000), page 575.] John Piper writes, "All the brutality against Jesus ... God was in it ... The lash on his back, the thorns on his head, the spit on his cheek, the bruises on his face, the nails in his hands, the spear in his side, the scorn of rulers, the betrayal of friends, the desertion by his disciples – these were all the result of sin, and *all designed by God* to destroy the power of sin." [John Piper, *The Passion of Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), page 119.]

⁴⁰ Hengel, page 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., page 5.

⁴² Ibid., page 19; also see Stott, page 25.

⁴³ This is a quote from Isaiah 29:14