

TTS Foundations 2023/24: **[S10] "For Our Sake..." (P2/5)**

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[1] The Power of the Cross – The Horror & Shame of Sacrifice

LOOK: Matt 16:21 / Matt 17:22-23 / Matt 20:17-19 / Matt 26:18

Jesus knew all-too-well the significance of what was about to happen – that this moment was prepared for.

But it's so easy to forget that this was also a human event. Happening to a real human being. With real, human emotions. In real, human history. In a real, human way.

LOOK: Matt 26:36-46 / **DISCUSS:** What are your impressions here?

- This is an incredible scene – feels so real.
 - **REFLECT:** What are your impressions here?
- Note Jesus' response:
 - **(1) Jesus needs to pray.**
 - Tells us something about Jesus + prayer.
 - Tells us something about his inner life.
 - **(2) Jesus was agitated – “deeply grieved, even to death”.**
 - A profoundly vulnerable, tender revelation.
 - **(3) Jesus asked, “Stay awake with me”.**
 - Jesus feels the need for fellowship.
 - Note that such a moment highlights the reliability of the Gospels – the authors would not be quick to mention Christ's vulnerability were they simply making things up as they went along.
- Luke the physician gives us a critical detail in his account.
 - **LOOK:** Luke 22:41-44
 - Hematidrosis – documented in those awaiting execution.
- **AND YET** – despite all of this, what is his ultimate decision?
 - **READ:** Matt 26:42-46
 - Behold the hero, the 'Lion Man of Judah'!
 - “Alone of all the creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator” [GK Chesterton]

Why was he so grieved? Without a doubt, the battle was spiritual.

BUT ALSO: crucifixion was a fate of unimaginable, unspeakable horror. **AND YET: for so many the cross is a piece of jewellery rather than a method of execution.**

[1A] The Roman Practice of Crucifixion – Physical Torment

- **Commonly said to have been invented by the Persians.**
 - Other nations too:
 - Carthaginians, Indians, Assyrians, Scythians, Macedonians, etc.
 - Although Romans were said to have perfected it.
 - According to Julius Paulus [c.200AD, Roman jurist] – crucifixion the *summum supplicium* (highest punishment), ahead of burning and decapitation.
- **Who were subjected to crucifixion?**
 - Roman citizens were generally exempt from crucifixion.
 - Except in cases of high treason.

- It was usually a 'reserved punishment'.
 - For foreign rebels, bandits, thieves – but esp. slaves.
 - Cicero: "*Servitūtis extrēmum summumque supplicium*" – "the extreme and ultimate punishment for slaves" [*Against Verres* II.V.169]
- **What did crucifixion actually entail?**
 - The Romans had a general protocol – BUT:
 - "Even in the Roman empire, where there might be said to be some kind of 'norm' for the course of the execution... the form of execution could vary considerably: crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full reign" [Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God*]
 - "I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms of the gibbet" [Seneca, *Of Consolation To Marcia* XX]
 - The common form:
 - Torture – flogging with a *flagrum*. Stripped naked.
 - Forced to carry the *patibulum*.
 - Nailed to cross – through wrists (via median nerve) and feet (top of feet / ankles).
 - Perched on small wooden platform.
- **What was the result?**
 - Death came by slow asphyxia, blood loss, or cardiac arrest.
 - Unbearable pain – excruciating, even.
 - Literally, *ex* (out of) *crux* (cross), *cruciāre* (to crucify).
- **Compare with Jesus' treatment:**
 - **LOOK:** Mark 15:6-17 / Matt 27:32-44 / Luke 23:32-38 / John 19:28-37.

[1B] The Shame and Curse of Crucifixion in the Ancient World

- **Crucifixion was designed not just to inflict terrible pain, but to shame the victim forever.**
 - This is something we struggle to get our heads around.
 - The ANE was a profoundly honour & shame fixated culture.
 - Europe not known this since Feudalism.
 - More akin to Japan.
 - Hence the nudity and being left to dogs.
- **In this context, the early Christian message was insanity.**
 - "*The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ... We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" [1 Cor 1:18+23]
 - "They say that our madness consists in the fact that we put a crucified man in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of the world" [Justin Martyr, *Apology* I.13-14]
- **Foolishness to Gentiles:**
 - Crucifixion came to be used as a vulgarity.
 - (A bit like "go hang yourself".)
 - In COG, Augustine quotes man called Apollo.

- A friend has asked him, 'What should I do with my wife? She's interested in Xianity!' Apollo's answer:
- "Let her continue as she pleases, persisting in her vain delusions, and lamenting in song a god who died in delusions, who was condemned by judges whose verdict was just, and executed in the prime of life by the worst of deaths, a death bound with iron" [in COG XIX.23]
- From Felix's *Octavius*, out of the mouth of Caecilius:
 - "To say that their ceremonies centre on a man put to death for his crime and on the fatal wood of the cross is to assign to these abandoned wretches sanctuaries which are appropriate to them and the kind of worship they deserve" [Felix, *Octavius* IX.4]
- **A stumbling-block to Jews:**
 - **LOOK:** Deut 21:22-23
 - Hengel – possibly also connected to a latent fear of human sacrifice.

[2] "In This Sign You Will Conquer" – On the *Theolōgia Crucis*

AND YET... despite all this → **LOOK:** Gal 6:14

[2A] Christianity's Radical Truth – The Crux of our Faith

- **This is the man early Christians heralded as the Son of God!**
 - AND NOT JUST THAT: but the Cross was predestined.
 - AND NOT JUST THAT: but the Cross was wisdom.
 - AND NOT JUST THAT: but we boast in the Cross.
 - **LOOK:** Phil 2:5-8 – Jesus died the slave's death.
 - **LOOK:** Heb 12:2 – Jesus endured the shame.
 - **LOOK:** Gal 3:13 – Jesus took on the curse.
- **We wear the Cross as a necklace now – that's how comfortable we are with it. But once it was utterly radical.**
 - Christian artists hid from the crucifixion for centuries.
 - Earliest surviving depiction done in mockery – re: the Alexamenos graffito [c.200AD]. The Greek reads, 'Alexamenon worships his God'.
 - Possibly the earliest depiction on doors of Santa Sabina in Rome [c. 400AD].
 - Before this – Shepherd, philosopher, etc.
 - Even then, the scene is often idealistic.
 - As if the Church is always wrestling with *this*:



Why am I focusing on this tonight? In a session on soteriology, why am I talking about the horror and the shame of the cross?

I would put to you two reasons.

FIRST: the Cross shows us what kind of Saviour we have.

SECOND: the Cross shows us the kind of life he's saved us for.

[2B] What Kind of Saviour? The Crucified God

- **Think about the kind of gods being worshipped by the people of antiquity.**
 - The gods of Hellenism:
 - Thunderous Zeus / "Well-grieved" Achilles.
 - The gods of Northern Europe:
 - Thor / Odin. Valhalla – the halls of warriors.
- **NOW THINK – what was the message of the early Christians?**
 - With what Gospel did they conquer the world for Christ??
 - *"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 2:19-20]
 - **LOOK:** 1 Cor 1:18-25.
- **KEY: the Cross shows us what kind of Saviour we have.**
 - **LOOK:** Isa 52:13-15-53:3
 - There is nothing here that makes sense.
 - It is totally contrary to worldly logic.
 - **AND YET** – God chose a cross as his throne.
 - "God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the Tree / Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me. / In the life of one an outcast and a vagabond on earth / In the common things He valued, and proclaimed of priceless worth / And above all in the horror of the cruel death He died / Thou hast bid us seek Thy glory, in a criminal crucified." [G.A. Studdert-Kennedy – The Unutterable Beauty]

[2C] What Kind of Salvation? A Cruciform Life

- **NOT JUST THAT: but the Cross also shows us the kind of life God has saved us for. (*In hōc signō vincēs!*)**
 - Indeed, there are two temptations here:
 - [A] To treat the crucifixion as a 'theory' – models, etc.
 - [B] To run from what the crucifixion entails.
 - "In the centre of our faith as Christians stands the mystery that God chose to reveal [himself] by unreserved submission to the downward pull. God not only chose an insignificant people to carry the Word of salvation through the centuries, not only chose a small remnant of those people to fulfil God's promises, not only chose a humble girl in an unknown town in Galilee to become the temple of the Word, but God also chose to manifest the fullness of divine love in a man whose life led to a humiliating death outside the walls of the city. ... This expression of downward mobility is unnatural for us, because it belongs to the essence of our sinful,

broken condition that every fibre of our being is infused with the spirit of rivalry and competition. We are always finding ourselves, even against our best desires and judgements, on the familiar road of upward mobility. The moment we think we are humble, we find ourselves wondering if we are more humble than our neighbour, and looking around to claim our reward. Downward mobility is the divine way, the way of the cross, the way of Christ. It is precisely this divine way of living that our Lord wants to give to us through his Spirit" [Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*]

- **Brothers & sisters, the Christian life is the cruciform life.**
 - It is a supernatural life – a life that can only be lived by the HS – and so grates against everything that is fleshly in us.
 - **LOOK:** Isa 30:18 – we would sooner depend on horses. (**WC: important for us to hear this!!**)

AND YET this is exactly the life to which we've been called.

LOOK: 1 Cor 12:6-10 – "come, pick up your cross".

READ: Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, 43-44.

"But why, Nathan", you might ask, "why did God choose the cross? And why does he choose for us to be a cross-bearing people?"

- We've already heard the answer to the first:
 - "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" [1 Cor 1:27-8]
 - To 'reduce to nothing' sin and all its evil – so making propitiation with God the Father.
 - To 'reduce to nothing' the powers + principalities.
 - To 'reduce to nothing' earthly powers – all that history of human sacrifice, of torture. (Antiquity ends at the Cross!)
 - To 'reduce to nothing' our suffering and pain.
 - To 'reduce to nothing' our death.
- But what of the second Q? Why must we take up our cross?
 - It's why David said to Goliath:
 - "The LORD will deliver you into my hand... [so that] all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear" [1 Sam 17:45+47]
 - Or why God said to Gideon:
 - "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me" [Judges 7:2]
 - **LOOK:** 2 Cor 4:6-11
 - **We are united to Christ in his cruciform sufferings because the Father would make the Son look beautiful in us.**
 - ("Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts" [Zech 4:6])

This rubs against everything in us.

When slighted, we want vindication.

When walking, we want others to move.

When we tell the story, we're the hero.

But what did Paul say, again?

"Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus..." [Phil 2:5]

And what did Christ himself say?

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" [Luke 14:11] (RE: Tolkien – a hidden truth.)

Three things to finish.

1. The sacrifice of Christ involved horror + shame.
 - a. Note well – he did that FOR YOU.
2. This weakness is not accidental or coincidental.
 - a. Indeed, this is EXACTLY what Christian theology looks like.
3. Neither is your weakness accidental or coincidental.
 - a. **LOOK:** 2 Cor 12:8-10 – Joel 3 / *In Hoc Signo Vincas*