

Sermon Transcript from March 25th, 2016
The Cross
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There's a lot of things that are happening on the cross as Jesus was crucified and there are a lot of ways to think about this. Some more helpful than others. But, there are some things and ways to think about it that are not that helpful. There's a very emotional illustration that will be told by countless pastors today on Good Friday. I may have used this illustration once or twice years ago. It's an illustration that depicts God the Father as a railroad operator who brings his son, Jesus, to work with him one day. And as the father is operating the railroad and switching the tracks and lowering the bridge, a train's approaching and the train is full of people, full of passengers. The father needs to lower the bridge so the train can cross the river safely and, if he does not lower the bridge at the right time, the train will go off the cliff into the river and everyone will perish.

So, as the father is about to lay down the draw bridge, he looks down and sees his son playing under the bridge in the gears and his options are, at that moment, kill his son and save the people or save his son and let the people die. The illustration goes, "With tears in his eyes, the father pulls the lever, crushes his son in order to save the people on the train. That's how the illustration goes. It's very emotional, but it's dead wrong. It's not a right way of thinking about it. It's wrong for all kinds of reasons. Most of them having to do with how everything in the illustration is just happening. The father happens to go to work that day with his son. He just happens to go to work, just does what he always does. The son happens to be playing in the gears naively. The son's playing around. "Yay! Gears!"

He's in the gears and he's unaware of what's going on around him. And the people happen to be traveling down the tracks, minding their own business, with no regard for what's going on. It's like time and chance all happen to the father. And everyone in this illustration is passive until the father has to make some active decision to kill his son and save the people. That is not what is happening on the cross.

The cross is not happening to Jesus. It wasn't some date circled on His calendar. "Pass over this time and I have to go to the cross." It's not just happening to Him. Jesus is happening to the cross. The cross is not happening to the Father. The Father is at work in Christ through the cross. The Father is happening to the cross. This is what that illustration of the railroad operator just doesn't work. It's not a good illustration.

So, what is a good illustration to what's happening on the cross? Many illustrations that we try to use fall short because they only capture one side of the Godhead acting on the cross. The best one that I know of from modern literature is Harry Potter. Hunger Games doesn't really work. You might go, "Well, what about Hunger Games?"

It falls short even though Katniss steps into the place of her sister, Primrose, and offers herself as tribute. It falls short, and this is why: President Snow is the god figure here and he's seeking blood tribute to appease the wrath of the gods of the Capital. So, that will not do. That is not what we see on the cross.

But, Lily Potter, Harry's mom, gave her life and acted in full knowledge and love to save her offspring by taking upon herself the curse of death, being killed by Voldemort. And later, Voldemort would call what Harry's mom did – and he would say to Harry – old magic. It was some ancient magic that saved and sealed Harry. And I think the first few books, at least, of the Harry Potter series are Harry growing in the knowledge of who he is and what his mom had done for him. And there's one moment in book five where Dumbledore, his head master, finally explicitly explains to him. He says this to him:

"You would be protected by an ancient magic of which Voldemort knows, which he despises and which he has always therefore underestimated to his own cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected. A protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood."

I honestly can't think of a better modern illustration than that. The power of our Creator's blood to save us, to seal us, to protect us at infinite cost to Himself. But, this illustration kind of falls short as well, because we're not just innocent babies being saved by our moms. No, we're more like Voldemort in the story. Our wand's doing the killing, our sins held Him there until it was accomplished. We cried out like we did a second ago, "Crucify! Crucify!"

We wanted Him dead. So, we are not just innocent bystanders in this story and we're

not just some people that just happened to be saved. We, actually in the scene as we read from the book of Mark, the Bible depicts Jesus being delivered up to the whole world and the whole world working together to betray Jesus. The world working together to deny Jesus, to reject Him, to charge Him, to beat Him, to mock Him, to kill Him. We are all complicit in this. It's all of us that did this.

The way that Mark tells this story, he does it very very keenly to make sure that we get it all. That Jesus was delivered up over to the Gentiles and the Gentiles through Pilot were like, "I don't really see anything wrong with Him."

And they yell, "Crucify!"

And they all did. And then he handed Him over to his own guards and then they beat Him and then they mocked Him and everyone mocked Him. Jew and Gentile alike; everyone mocked Jesus, everyone condemned Jesus. And they put a robe around Him and they mocked Him and they said, "Hail, king of the Jews!"

And the Jews said, "Take that sign down. That's what He said He is."

And then Pilot said, "What I have written, I have written."

This isn't just happening to Jesus and we don't just happen to be bystanders, we're a part of this. When Peter recounts what happened on the cross in a sermon he gives in the book of Acts, he says this. Listen to this.

Acts 2:22-23, "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

You nailed Him to the cross. The cross didn't just happen. What we see is that. God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit and collective humanity were all at work in this one event. It would probably take a lifetime to unpack this event. But, every person is at work in this event. All of the Godhead and all of humanity are at work in this one event. This is why the cross is at the center of the Christian faith. It is the primary symbol associated with Jesus Christ.

No one wears a necklace of an empty tomb around their neck or a loaf of bread or a cup of wine, they wear a cross. Which is strange because a cross, in the first century, was a humiliating symbol. It was one of the most torturous ways to die invented by the Romans. So excruciating that the very word excruciating means "from the cross." It was so excruciating and so humiliating that Roman citizens were not even allowed to be crucified.

Cicero, a Roman philosopher, wrote that the cross should be removed from a Roman citizen's thoughts, his eyes and ears. It's not something that a civilized person in the Roman world should have witnessed ever or even talked about. It was that horrendous. It was that horrific. It was that bloody. It was that humiliating. Anyone at this time in the first century, Jew or Gentile, Jew or Greek, everyone saw the cross as an act of you being humiliated and you being cursed by God, or "the gods" if you're Greek. And Jesus hung on the cross. But, we cherish the cross. We Christians sing songs about the cross all year long. Once a year, we set aside a day to remember the cross on Good Friday and we call the cross good.

Because, the symbol that spoke of Rome's naked power and might is now that symbol that speaks of God's naked love and justice. God takes this symbol of the cross and he flips it upside down. So, what was happening on the cross? What was God doing on the cross?

Romans 8:32 says that God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all. On the cross, God was giving up His Son for us. His pure and beautiful and spotless and blameless Son to us. His vulnerable Son to us. He was giving His Son. He didn't spare Him. He gave Him up for us all. Jesus was dying for us and God, it says in Romans 3:25, **"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood."**

That word "atonement" is a very important word. On the cross, God was reconciled. That's kind of what that word means. You can break the word "atonement" down like

this: "At-one-ment." It means that the two things that are separated become one. So, on the day of "at-one-ment" or the day of atonement for Israel, it was making Israel one again with God because their sin had separated them from God. And atonement, the sacrifice of a pure lamb, brought them back in unison with God. On the cross, Jesus was making us one with God through His precious blood.

And on the cross, it says in 2 Corinthians, God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. On the cross, God was removing our sin, placing the consequences, placing the punishment of our sins upon Jesus. Our sins. The way that the Scriptures depict our sins and the consequences of our sin is death, exile, being kicked out of the Garden, living east of Eden. And then the people of God, every time they would sin, they would get further and further and further east or further and further and further in exile.

Another way you would be under the judgment of God or the wrath of God is when God handed you over to the Gentiles. So, when God handed Israel over to Babylon, God was judging them. And, it says in Deuteronomy, anyone who hangs on a tree is accursed by God. What we see in the crucifixion is Jesus coming under all of that for us. Jesus being delivered up unto the Gentiles, being delivered to Pilot and being crucified on a Roman cross. We see Jesus being exiled. He was crucified outside of the city walls. We see Jesus hanging on a tree. We see Jesus ultimately dying.

He bore our curse. The curse of our sins, the wrath of God for our sins was upon Him that we might be made right with God and thus be restored and in right relationship with God. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:19, **"For God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."**

The whole world is being reconciled and brought together and brought at peace by the cross. No longer counting people's sins against them. This is the activity of the cross. This is what God was doing on the cross. Like I said, the cross was not happening to God, God was happening to the cross. And His happening to the cross was for us. He's moving toward the cross for us. There's a moment in Jesus' ministry where He sets His face like flint to Jerusalem. He's going to the cross and He's going to the cross for us. He's going to the cross to pursue us. The Father was not caught off guard by the cross. The Son was not naive going to the cross. They knew this was happening.

But, don't think for a second that this is just God being cool and calculated to gain our salvation. Like, Jesus went cool to the cross. Like, "I'm going and I'm going to gain their salvation. This is what I'm doing."

That is not the picture that we get, even in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus cries out, "Let this cup pass from me," as He's about to face drinking in the cup of the wrath of God down to the very bottom. He staggers. He's like, "I don't know if I can go through this," but He does. Because what happens on the cross is not just God being cool and calculated, it was absolute agony for all of the Godhead.

Mark 15:33, we read this, **"At noon, darkness came over the whole land."**

At noon, it was dark. This here is a metaphor for the judgment of God.

"And at three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?'"

Now remember, His face was beaten in. He was beaten and pummeled. They would throw a robe over His face and punch Him and beat Him with rods and other things that men do in torture that probably shouldn't be named. And they did this to Jesus and they would mock Him saying, "If you are a prophet, tell us who just hit you."

So, Jesus' eyes were swollen in, His teeth were busted out, His lips were swollen. So, when He mumbled, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani,' it sounded like He was calling out for Elijah. It sounded like He was saying, "Elijah, Elijah." So, people mocked Him like, "Oh, He's calling out for Elijah to save Him now. Look, He's calling out to Elijah."

But, He wasn't calling out for Elijah. He was saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This is Jesus' cry of rejection. This is Jesus' cry of neglect. There is much much debate around what this cry means, but everyone agrees that Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. And, if you were to go to Psalm 22 you will see that during the crucifixion, Jesus was living out

the situation described in the Psalm of suffering. Psalm 22 is like what Jesus sees from the cross as the suffering servant.

So, Psalm 22 starts: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? I cry out to you, but you do not answer, I find no rest.

"I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults at me, shaking their heads.

"Bulls of Bashan surround me; strong bulls encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey. I am poured out like water, all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. My mouth is dried up and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.

"Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircle me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them."

Jesus can't get all that out. He can barely talk. And so He just says the first line. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

See, for Jesus, death is the final stage of His incarnation. On the cross, Jesus has now become like every single one of us. Subject to death, facing His own death. He's become like us in every way and the cross is the final installment of that every way. Because He would die just like we will die. He would face death like we all do. He would feel the experience of being forsaken because that is a fact of life in this world. But, don't just read your forsakenness into Jesus' cry, that would have actually no redeeming power at all.

Instead, when we hear Jesus cry and His cry of forsakenness, instead of hearing Jesus entering into the experience of our cry, like, what was actually happening behind our cry? See, you and I feel forsaken. We kind of go, "God, where are you today? Why do I feel so forsaken?"

We feel forsaken, Jesus was forsaken. Jesus actually experiences the forsakenness behind our feelings of forsakenness. He experiences it in a real way. Jesus experiences the infinite wrath of God on our behalf. But, don't just see this as divine child abuse, as many people will try to say. As if the Father is punishing the Son for our sins and getting some sort of jolly kick out of it. Like, "Yes. I'm punishing you for his sin, I'm punishing you for his sin."

That's not what's happening on the cross. Remember, the cross is not happening to God, God is happening to the cross. See, on the cross, God actually delivers Himself up to suffering and death at the hands of God's own creatures. And by delivering Himself to His creatures, God delivers Himself up to the experience of His own wrath. God was at work and Christ reconciled the world to Himself.

So, when God, through Christ, was submitting to the cross, God was placing God's self into the hands of God's creatures to suffer under God's wrath for us. Meaning God gives Himself up to His own wrath to be dealt out by the hands of His own creatures. And so, on the cross, God's traditional attributes, attributes like wisdom and power and justice and holiness, are revealed in radically non-traditional ways. We see the wisdom and the power and the justice and the holiness of God in the cross, Paul would say. But, we see it through humiliation and paradox and suffering and death and separation and pain.

So, the best explanation I can give you to what is happening on the cross is a quote, and it goes like this:

"God, because in His mercy He willed to forgive sinful humanity and, being truly merciful, willed to forgive them righteously, that is without in any way condoning their sin, purposed to direct against His very own self in the person of His Son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved."

This is what was going on on the cross. God working through Jesus because He wanted to forgive us and to forgive us righteously because God just can't say, "You know what? I know you're in sin, I know that separates us. But, you know what? Forgiven."

There's no justice there. There must be justice. There must be justice brought in order to forgive us righteously and justly, not saying that our sins are okay but showing the ugliness of our sins. He Himself turned His own wrath against Himself and absorbed the wrath of God for us. This is Christ.

One of my favorite writers, Frederick Buechner, says that in the incarnation, when Jesus became human as a baby, He came into our world as a vulnerable baby. There is probably nothing more vulnerable than a newborn baby. And I think that God Himself was born into our world as a vulnerable baby. And Frederick Buechner says, "So vulnerable, in fact, that we could look at the Christ child, the Christ baby, and take His skull in our hands and crush it."

He became that vulnerable that we can crush His head with our hands or hang Him on a cross if He gets too big for that. And that's what we did. Because God became vulnerable for us, God gave Himself for us.

So, Isaiah is probably the best depiction of what Christ did on the cross. It's the best prophecy, it's the clearest and it says this in Isaiah 53: **"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God."**

See, everyone would have seen Jesus on the cross and thought that He was being punished by God. Jew would have thought He was being punished by God because He was hanging on a tree and He claimed to be God and that's why they killed Him. And then Gentile would've thought He was accursed by the gods because He was crucified, the most humiliating way to die. No one who was virtuous dies on a cross. So, they would have considered Him accursed by God. So, everyone thought He was being punished by God, stricken by God and afflicted by God.

"But," Isaiah says, "He was actually there for us. He was there because we deserved to be on the cross. He was crushed because of our sins. The punishment that brought us peace was on Him and, by His wounds, we're actually healed."

There's this great and beautiful and mysterious exchange that goes on. He goes to our cross, He goes to our death and He exchanges, for His death, life. And He gives us life. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Every single person in here will stand before God guilty. We all know it. You're even guilty of breaking your own standards. You have not done the things that you said you'd do on January 1. If God just held you to your own standards, you would be guilty. Let alone God's standards.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each turn to our own way and the Lord laid on Christ the sin, the iniquity, the brokenness, the waywardness, the rebellious heart, all of it of us all on Him. And so, on Good Friday, we celebrate this. We look at the cross and we say, "Oh, wonderful cross."

We look at the cross and we say, "Thank You for the cross."

We look at the cross of Christ and we say that all of these agencies were working together to bring about our salvation. That God happened to the cross, that God went to the cross for us and it was our sins that brought Him down.

Let's pray.

God, thank You. Thank You for the cross, Lord. The cross that redeems us, the cross that saves us, the cross that brings us right into relationship with You. Our sin's nailed to the cross. It is finished with the words that You said at the end before You breathed Your last. It is finished. Our sins are paid for. Our sins are forgiven. We can have newness of life. Your blood can cover us, it can save us, it can protect us and it can seal us. Powerful blood. Powerful body.

Thank You, most beautiful Christ, most vulnerable Son of God, for all that You accomplished for us on the cross. As we receive communion tonight, we receive it with hearts of repentance, hearts of sobriety knowing that our sins are that ugly that they would mar the chosen one that bad, that it would hit us fresh and that, probably more than anything Lord, that we would see that it was Your love that drove You to the cross.

It was our sins, but it was also Your love. Thank You for Your love. We respond to You, reflect upon You and remember You now. In Jesus' name.