

## Lesson 4

### THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS IN THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL AND THEOLOGY OF THE HOLY CROSS

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**BIBLICAL PASSAGES TO BE READ FOR THE LESSON:** 1 Corinthians 1:18-25/  
Galatians 5:11, 6:12-14/ Ephesians 2:16/ Philipians 2:8/ Philemon 3:18/ Colossians  
1:20/2:14

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**HISTORY OF CRUCIFIXION:** Crucifixion did not begin with the Romans, but it was a method of execution that had developed centuries earlier in the ancient near East. The Medes and the Persians practiced this gruesome torture method as well as the Carthaginians and the Egyptians, and later it was adopted among the Greeks and finally the Romans in the first century. Crucifixion was mentioned in history from about the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD.

**The Roman Cross:** The Romans called it by its Latin word *crucifixus* which means to "fix on a cross". The first century Roman cross consisted of two large wooden beams, a stake and a crossbeam (patibulum). The crossbeam was locked into place at the very top or near the top of a stake.

**Extreme Torture:** Since the body needed air in the lungs, and blood circulating in the heart the victim would have to push himself up with his nailed feet, and pulled himself up with his nailed hands.

**Breaking the Legs:** To hasten a prisoner's death the Roman soldier would break the prisoner's legs with an iron club. This would also assure that the prisoner was indeed dead.

**The Place of Execution:** The place of crucifixion was usually in a very public place where the bodies were left to rot. In Israel crucified prisoners were taken down in observance of the Sabbath.

**Announcement of the Crime:** As the condemned prisoner was led bearing a crossbeam to his place of execution, he would be preceded by a public crier who would announce his crime. His primary charge was written on a tablet (titulus) which also preceded him and finally fixed to the cross that he was crucified on.

**Roman Crucifixion:** It was indeed the Romans who practiced crucifixion as a common method of execution. According to Roman law a Roman citizen could not be crucified, crucifixion was for slaves and extreme criminals, political or religious agitators, pirates, or those who had no civil rights.

**Julius Caesar and Crucifixion:** Julius Caesar in his youth was captured by pirates, being held for ransom. He later found them and crucified them all, but he also slit their throats first to hasten their deaths.

**Augustus Caesar and Crucifixion:** The Emperor Augustus once made a boast that he had captured 30,000 runaway slaves and crucified them. There are many accounts of the Romans crucifying their victims, mass public crucifixions. When Spartacus led his rebellion against Rome, over 6000 slaves were captured and crucified on the main road to Capua (Appian Way) by the order of Crassus. Their bodies remained there as a token of Roman justice to all who would attempt to rebel.

**Crucifixion in the Colosseum:** It was a common sight in the Flavian Amphitheatre to crucify deserters, prisoners-of-war, and criminals from the lower classes. Martial records one crucifixion in which a notorious bandit was executed by crucifixion and filleted by a wild bear for the amusement of the crowd:

**Crucifixion and the Jews:** In Israel a man named Judas rebelled against Rome and he captured the city of Sepphoris and made it his headquarters. The legions of Rome finally defeated them under Varus, and the Romans crucified 2,000 Jews. In 88 BC Alexander Jannaeus, the king and high priest of Judaea, crucified 800 Pharisees.

**Crucifixion and Jesus:** In Judaea on Passover at about 31 AD Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judaea had Jesus of Nazareth crucified as a criminal of Rome. Although the death of Jesus is mentioned in ancient sources outside of the Bible, the details of the crucifixion and the events surrounding his death and resurrection are mentioned only in the Bible. The Bible reveals that Jesus' death was planned by the Jewish authorities, and because they did not have power to put to death a condemned criminal they turned him over to the Romans for execution. Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judea made the final decision to have Jesus crucified. The Romans first scourged Jesus, then the Romans mocked him by placing a purple robe on his body and hailed him as the "King of the Jews", then the Roman soldiers made a crown of thorns and placed it on his head. Next the Romans led Jesus to his place of execution, he was made to bear his own cross but when he could not carry it any longer he was assisted by a man named Simon of Cyrene. When Jesus arrived to a place outside the city walls called Golgotha his place of execution, the Roman soldiers nailed his hands and his feet to the cross and a tablet was placed above his head announcing his crime of proclaiming himself King of the Jews, the tablet recorded this INRI in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. Jesus was crucified with two other criminals and he hung there for three hours. The Roman soldiers divided his garments and cast lots for his robe, and people who passed by wagged their heads in disgust, and mocking him they stated "he saved others but he cannot save himself". When the Roman soldiers were ordered to break the prisoner's legs Jesus was already dead and his bones were never broken, but instead the soldier pierced him in the side with a spear. Jesus' body was removed and he was buried in a tomb nearby. After three days and three nights he rose from the dead.

**Crucifixion and the Christians:** The Emperor Nero who was much younger than many people imagine, crucified an immense number of Christians for his own insane pleasure. He had actually blamed the Christians for the great fire of Rome. According to tradition (Origen) the apostle Peter was crucified upside down. Throughout the history of the Roman Empire Christians were martyred and crucified. Crucifixion came to an end under the Emperor Constantine who abolished crucifixion throughout the Roman Empire as a means of punishment. The empty cross became our symbol because Jesus conquering death once and for all by dying on the cross.

**Crucifixion in the Bible:** The crucifixion of Jesus is recorded in Matthew 27:27-56, Mark 15:21-38, Luke 23:26-49, and John 19:16-37. Christian theology teaches that Jesus Christ was crucified on a Roman cross as the perfect atoning sacrifice for the sins all of mankind, thus making the crucifix, or cross, one of the central themes and defining symbols of Christianity.

**CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS IN THE WRITINGS OF ST. PAUL:** Jesus' crucifixion is central for Paul. He is willing to endure persecution due to his belief that he Messiah was not humiliated but glorified in his crucifixion (Gal 5:11; 2 Cor 11:24-28). First-century Romans commonly employed crucifixion against brigands and rebels. It would have been exceedingly strange for Paul to preach a crucified savior. Even among his fellow Jews, Paul met with scorn. In addition to Roman views of crucifixion, the Jewish people knew examples of biblical figures "hung on trees"—especially Haman, the archnemesis of the Jewish nation in the book of Esther. And Deuteronomy declared the person hung upon a tree to be "cursed" (Deut 21:22–23). How then could the promised Messiah submit to crucifixion? Thus Paul acknowledges the cross to be a "stumbling-block" to Jews (1 Cor 1:23). Nonetheless, Paul ardently witnesses to salvation offered by God through Jesus' death.

In contrast to the Deuteronomic "curse" of the cross, Paul envisions the Messiah voluntarily bearing for others the curse that properly falls on all who disobey God's law (Gal 3:10–14). According to Paul, Jesus' death justifies, saves, delivers, redeems, and reconciles the sinner to God (Rom 5:6–11; Gal 1:4; 3:13). The idea that Jesus would endure crucifixion voluntarily for the sake of others came to be regarded as the ultimate symbol of humility and love; In this way, the cross would serve as a profound model for Christians devoted to self-denial and loving service (Phil 2:8; 2 Cor 5:14–15; Eph 5:2). For Paul, there is no Christian gospel without the crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, in 1 Corinthians 1:17–18, he speaks of "the gospel" as equal to "the message about the cross because the gospel is what God has accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection. Compared to the Gospels, Paul approaches the crucifixion from a very different angle. For many Jews like Paul, during the first century the notion of a Christ who is crucified was an utterly scandalous idea on How and why should God's anointed meet his end in such a shameful and abominable way?

Paul knew that dying on a cross expressed society's contempt for the crucified, labeling him a dangerous criminal. Yet for Paul, crucifixion was the bone of contention to speak about Jesus's saving act. It is no accident that Paul tells his readers virtually nothing about Jesus' teachings, miracles, and parables. His interest is in Jesus the crucified Christ and so he reminds Christians in Corinth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2/ 1:22–24). When we read Paul discussing the crucifixion, we encounter someone who wants to talk about what the cross does or what happens as a result of Jesus' death. Paul regards this death as having happened "for us" (1 Thess. 5:9–10) and "for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3; Gal. 1:4), but what does that mean? In part, it means that Christ's crucifixion is a theological event—an event through which God acts on humanity's behalf. Through the cross, God displays love to humankind (Rom. 5:8).

**Crucifixion of Jesus in the life of St. Paul:** St. Paul was profoundly struck by the reality of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. He was literally struck blind for three days by this reality in the person of Christ. After his experience of Jesus on the way to Damascus, St. Paul began to see everything in reference to the Paschal Mystery: the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. He understood that this death and resurrection, was not like the death and rising of someone like Lazarus. Lazarus would experience death again. He knows that "Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him" (Romans 6:9). Jesus is God due to the fact of his bodily resurrection. This is proof. The tomb is empty. He has appeared in his glorified humanity to Cephas and five hundred others, and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He has spoken to Paul himself. Bound up with this truth that Jesus is God he started boasting of nothing except Christ crucified.

St. Paul helps us understand the importance of the death and resurrection of Christ in a couple of different ways. According to St. Paul, the fulfillment of the suffering servant song of Isaiah has arrived. The "preaching of the cross" was the distinctive message of the Apostle Paul. It was the gospel he preached, that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead for our salvation (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Paul's gospel was faith + 0. Neither the Twelve nor the other writers of the New Testament preached this gospel until they learned about it from Paul.

### **Paradox of the Cross in the writing of St. Paul to 1 Corinthians 1: 18 - 25**

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside." Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,*

*but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

**Explanation of the above passage:** We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The idea that the Messiah would be crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews—something that tripped up their beliefs of what the Messiah would be like. Many Jews considered the Good News of Jesus Christ to be foolish, because they thought the Messiah would be a conquering king accompanied by signs and miracles. Jesus has not restored David’s throne as they expected. Besides, he was executed as a criminal and how could a criminal be a savior? Greeks too considered the Gospel foolish. They did not believe in a bodily resurrection. They did not see in Jesus the powerful characteristics of their mythological gods and they thought no reputable person would be crucified. To them, death was defeat, not victory. The Good News of Jesus Christ still sounds foolish to many. Our society worships power, influence and wealth. Jesus came as a humble, poor servant and he offers his kingdom to those who have faith, not to those who do all kinds of good deeds to try to earn good gifts. This looks foolish to the world but Christ is power, the only way we can be saved. Knowing Christ personally is the greatest wisdom anyone could have. The message of Christ’s death for sins sounds foolish to those who don’t believe. Death seems to be the end of the road, the ultimate weakness. But Jesus did not stay dead. His resurrection demonstrated his power even over death. And he will save us from our eternal death and give us everlasting life if we trust him as savior and Lord.

**The Cross is a symbol of Jesus’ victory over death:** In the cross, Jesus was highly exalted by the Father. He was lifted up in the cross. In Numbers 21:8-9 we read an interesting incident which connects with the life of Jesus’ lifting up in the cross. Throughout the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, God was constantly teaching them things about Himself and about their own sinfulness. He brought them into the wilderness, to the same mountain where He revealed Himself to Moses, so that He could instruct them in what He required of them. Shortly after the amazing events at Mt. Sinai, God brought them to the border of the Promised Land, but when the people heard the reports from the spies, their faith failed. They said that God could not overcome the giants in the land. As a result of this unbelief, God sent them into the wilderness to wander until that generation died out (Numbers 14:28-34). In Numbers 21, the people again got discouraged, and in their unbelief, they murmured against Moses for bringing them into the wilderness. They had already forgotten that it was their own sin that caused them to be there, and they tried to blame Moses for it. As a judgment against the people for their sin, God sent poisonous serpents into the camp, and people began to die. When Moses prayed for the people, God instructed him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole so the people could be healed (Numbers 21:5- 7). The serpent on the stick was a reminder of their sin which brought about their suffering. This serpent was

symbolic of the serpents God used to chastise the people for their unbelief. The people did get healed when they looked at the serpent. This event is given by Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:14. Jesus indicated that this bronze serpent was a foreshadowing of Him. The serpent, a symbol of sin and judgment, was lifted up from the earth and put on a tree and those who looked at it and expressed sorrow were healed. The serpent lifted up and cursed symbolized Jesus, who takes away sin from everyone who would look to Him in faith, just like the Israelites had to look to the upraised symbol in the wilderness. Paul is reminding the Galatians that Jesus became a curse for us, although He was blameless and sinless—the spotless Lamb of God. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In short, Those doomed to die from snakebite were healed by obeying God’s command to look up at the elevated bronze snake. Similarly, we are saved when we look up to Jesus, believing as our Savior.

**Life messages from Jesus’ Crucifixion:** The physical death of Jesus on the cross is the central message – the central key from which true Christianity is based on. Without Jesus’ physical death on the cross, there is no Christianity, there is no eternal salvation for any of us, and there is no heaven or any meaningful afterlife after we die and cross over.

**What is our Christian faith all about?** It is not a philosophy of life. It is not an ideology. Christianity is not about a teaching but a person. Christian life is totally defined by the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and him crucified! (The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world - Jn 1:29) Jesus Christ is the living presence of God amongst us. He is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). He does not simply show the way to God, but He is “the way the truth and the life” St Paul’s message was not a set of teachings, but the Person of Christ. He didn’t come with worldly wisdom, but he came to preach the Gospel and the Gospel is Christ crucified!

**The Cross is the center of our life:** The entire liturgical year is centered around the Passion of Christ in Holy Week. (O Cross, you are the guardian of the whole world. O Cross, you are the height of the Church's beauty. O Cross, you are what strengthened the Emperors. O Cross, the believers' firm support. O Cross, the glory of Angels and the defeat of the demons)

**What the Cross says about God?** It is sign of God’s super abundant love. It is a sign of Christ’s victory over death and over the devil. It is a universal symbol of victory and glory. It is a symbol of God’s presence amongst us. It is a universal symbol of salvation for everyone. It is sign of our reconciliation back to God. The Cross is the ultimate act of God, it should also be the ultimate word about us since we are created in his image

**What does it mean to be crucified with Christ in Galatians 2:20?** Being crucified with Christ is a decision of faith that we take, which means that we resolve no longer to live according to the sinful lusts and desires of our flesh – we no longer commit what we know to be sin willfully and consciously. Sin in our flesh has been nailed to the cross by faith. Unless this becomes true in our lives, we will continue to suffer defeat and failure. As long as we live for ourselves, misery will result, because in us, that is, in our flesh, dwells no good thing. But when we are crucified with Christ, reckoning ourselves dead to sin but alive to God, we can come to victory over conscious sin, as far as we have light. We must always remember that we do not really know what is going on in people's lives. Our task is simply to love them, to forgive them, to show them the truth, to embrace them, to identify with them, to be one with them. We simply have to do this and trust in God that He will find ways to bring good out of difficult situations

**Jesus' seven sayings from the Cross:** Jesus spoke his last seven words from the cross and it has been an age old practice of the church to reflect on his last words as an integral part of Good Friday observance so that we may repent on our sins and resolve to renew our lives and thus participate fully in the joy of Jesus' resurrection.

1. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Normally the crucified in their moment of pain, agony and helplessness would curse and spit at the spectators but the innocent, betrayed, arrested and scourged and condemned Jesus did not curse or spit instead he asked forgiveness for those responsible for his unjust and cruel death. Jesus practiced what He had preached "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt 5: 44). Jesus reminded Peter that there should not be any limit to forgiveness. Archbishop St. Oscar Romero, the outspoken champion of the oppressed in El Salvador, said the same first word of Jesus from the cross, as he was shot dead at the altar. There is a Chinese proverb: "One who hates another digs two graves: one for himself and the other for the one he hates"
2. "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:42-43). There were two thieves on either side of Jesus. They were really guilty, deserving death. The thief on the right (traditionally called Dismas) literally melted with repentance at the sight of Jesus crucified and addressed Jesus humbly "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus said, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise." Dismas did not have to confess all his sins to Jesus but Jesus forgave and forgot them all and at once. But the hard-hearted, unrepentant sinner on the left remained the same sinner in spite of Jesus' presence and exemplary death right before his eyes.
3. "Woman behold your son, behold your mother" When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he uttered these kind words. Jesus' disciples had deserted him; his friends had forsaken him; his nation had rejected him; and his enemies cried out for his blood. But his faithful mother stood there sorrowfully at the

foot of the Cross. Jesus had given everything. He had nothing else left, but his Mother, and he gave to us his mother too as our spiritual Mother. She is the mother of the Church to honor, love, respect and imitate her. The Bible says, "Honor your father and your mother."

4. "Eli, Eli, Lema Sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46). This fourth and central Word of Jesus on the Cross is another prayer, from the Psalms. Already during His ministry Jesus had known what it meant to be forsaken. Forsaken by the members of His own family, people of His home town, Nazareth, people of Jerusalem, in short by everyone. But He always experienced tenderness of His Heavenly Father and the presence of the Heavenly Father gave purpose and strength in his trying moments. In the hardest moments when we have been stretched out and are in great pain, we always know that He is there, by our side, feeling everything that we are feeling. He will not fail us, forsake us, or abandon us.
5. "I thirst. While Jesus was dying on the Cross, He had developed an agonizing thirst. The draining away of blood from the body brings on intensive thirst. The physical agony of thirst is terrible beyond the power of words to describe. The whole body cries out for water. We read in the Psalm 63: 2: "O God, you are my God -- for you I long! For you my body yearns; for you my soul thirsts, like a land parched, lifeless, and without water."
6. "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). It was his time to die. It was for this He came into the world to redeem humanity and now that his mission was accomplished, he raised his voice in a triumphant shout: "it is finished!" He had very short span of life, 33 years. But he majestically accomplished everything as the OT prophets foretold of him. He does not merely say, "It is over;" he says rather, "It is accomplished, fulfilled, achieved." The expression "It is finished," is the epitome of Christ's life and ministry. Victory over sin, evil and death by willingly, and lovingly and defeating them completely.
7. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'; and when he had said this he breathed his last"(Luke 23:46). Jesus was always submitting Himself to God, and when He died, He died just as He had lived. Jesus entrusted his spirit, his life to God his Father in faith. We commit our way unto the Lord living our lives in such a way as to hear the consoling and heartwarming words of God our Father, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."