

Series – At the Cross

#1 The Characters Around the Cross

Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19, 1 Peter 2:23

Introduction: If you travel to 1101 E. Michigan Avenue, Albion, MI, you will find a State historic marker: "The Birthplace of the Old Rugged Cross"

It was there in 1912, where George Bernard, an itinerate Methodist preacher penned those immortal words before sending them to Charles Gabriel, in Chicago, to set them to music.

The birthplace of the Old Rugged Cross is not Michigan Avenue, but on a bloody hill called Golgotha, which means the Place of the Skull.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,

Has a wondrous attraction for me;

For the dear Lamb of God left his glory above

To bear it to dark Calvary.

STORY - The parents of a ten-year-old public-school boy who was failing fifth grade math decided to enroll their son in a private Catholic school after exhausting all other methods. The youngster stormed home the first day of school, walked right past them, straight to his room, and locked the door. Two hours later, he emerged for a quick meal, announced that he was studying, and went straight back to his studies until bedtime.

This pattern continued until the end of the grading period. After school, the boy walked home with his report card, dropped it on the family dinner table, and went straight to his room. His parents cautiously opened the letter, saw a big "A" under the subject, MATH!

They went to the boy's room with excitement. "Was it the nuns?" the father asked. The boy only shook his head and said, "No."

"Was it the one-on-one tutoring? Peer-mentoring?" asked the mother. Again, the boy shrugged, "No." "The textbooks? The teacher? The curriculum?" asked the father.

"No, no, no." the son said. "From the very first day of school, when I walked into the lobby, and I saw a guy nailed to the PLUS sign, I knew they meant business!"

The cross of Christ is "THE" sign to the world that God meant business! And His business was that of punishing sin, so that He could offer us forgiveness, salvation, grace, and mercy.

I'm beginning a new series of messages today called, **"At the Cross."** I'm sure you know the song written by Isaac Watts in the 18th century.

At the cross at the cross where I first saw the light

And the burden of my heart rolled away.

It was there by faith I received my sight.

And now I am happy all the day.

Maybe you're familiar with Chris Tomlin's modern version: [At the Cross \(Love Ran Red\)](#)

[Verse 1]

There's a place where mercy reigns and never dies.

There's a place where streams of grace flow deep and wide.

Where all the love I've ever found

Comes like a flood.

Comes flowing down.

[Chorus]

**At the cross...At the cross...I surrender my life...I'm in awe of
You...I'm in awe of You...Where Your love ran red...And my sin
washed white...I owe all to You...I owe all to You Jesus**

Crucifixion was the worst form of capital punishment, reserved for the worst, most vile offenders. Jesus hung for 6 hours on the cross, with many onlookers.

My message today is: “The Characters Around the Cross.”

In the Book of Isaiah, we read of the painful punishment of Jesus, but it does not mention the cross or crucifixion. One of the things that you will notice about the Lord's crucifixion is that the bible does not give us any details.

For Instance:

(Luke 23:33 ESV) - ***And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.***

Luke narrows down the crucifixion to four simple words, "***There they crucified him...***" and that is the magnitude of his information. The main reason that we have no deep insight and details about the Lord's crucifixion is simple, all the readers in those days knew about crucifixions.

John MacArthur, gives us the following commentary: **Do I need to say to you that the New Testament is extremely restrained in how it describes the crucifixion of Jesus? Extremely restrained. Three Greek words there, "there they crucified him." Four words in English. That's all it says. There they crucified him.**

That's all it says in Matthew 27.

That's all it says in Mark 15.

That's all it says in Luke 23 and that's all it says in John, chapter 19.

There are no further details, other than... "***there they crucified him.***"

Crucifixion was common. We're told that as many as 30,000 people were crucified in the land of Israel around the time of Christ. The Romans always crucified them in public places along highways and on hills, at 8 to 15 feet high, so that everybody would see the results of rebellion against Rome.

Jesus endured what every other victim of crucifixion endured.

History tells us that the act of crucifixion began with the Persians, as King Darius crucified 3,000 Babylonians. Then Alexander the Great wanted to enact vengeance upon the people of Tyre for their mistreatment of him, so he crucified 2,000 people along the seashore, for all to see.

In 71 B.C. there was a great uprising of slaves against the Roman Empire, led by the great gladiator Spartacus, which led to the crucifixion of 6,000 of his followers along a stretch of highway from Capua to Rome, totaling 120 miles.

Alexander Jannaeus was the King of Judea from 103 to 76 B.C., and it is noted that he crucified 800 Pharisees, as their wives and children were made to watch, so crucifixion was well documented in biblical times.

The Roman's took something so gruesome and turned it into one of the most painful forms of capital punishment. The Roman's came into power in 63 B.C and in 70 A.D. they destroyed the Jewish Temple and begin crucifying the Jews. It has been said that Titus crucified so many Jews that they ran out of lumber.

The bible does not give us much insight about crucifixion, but history does, and it was bloody, brutal, and barbaric. The idea of crucifixion was ***extreme punishment, extreme pain,*** and ***extreme prolonging of suffering*** before death.

Just so you know, the word ***'excruciating'*** comes from the Latin word, ***'excruciare,'*** meaning **"as painful as a crucifixion or from out of the cross."** The pain derived from crucifixion was so intense they had to create a new word for it.

The act of crucifixion was physically and violently excruciating, but it was also Emotionally and Socially Excruciating, as the crowds of people would look upon them, mocking and cursing. If you were sentenced to die on the cross, you were considered unworthy of living and of no value to society.

Crucifixions were the most public and humiliating events known to man. It was so horrible that the Romans would not typically crucify their own citizens, but only outsiders.

Remember that the suffering of Christ did not begin on the cross, but in the court of Pilate as he was scourged by the Roman guard. A scourging was a grotesque

form of punishment in itself - as a whip made of several strips of leather, dipped in tar and shards of broken pottery and nails would be laid over the back of the Savior then suddenly ripped from the back with such force that it would at times rip bones from the ribs of the one being punished.

Jesus had already been slapped and beaten repeatedly, so his face was no doubt swollen and bleeding. After the scourging, His back would have been a mass of bleeding wounds and quivering muscles.

It was at this point the soldiers placed a robe on his back - mocking his claim to royalty, put a crown of thorns on his head, a staff in his hand as a mock scepter. And the soldiers bowed down to say, "Hail King of the Jews."

(1 Peter 2:23, ESV) ***"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."***

It was at that point that Jesus was required to carry his own cross. In fact, the weight was so great (100 – 200 lbs.) that Matthew tells us a man named Simon was compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

In his book [The Life of Christ](#), Frederick Farrar describes crucifixion as follows:

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly-dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of intended wounds-all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened [when a victim took several days to die]; the arteries-especially at the head and stomach-became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood, and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst, and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which

made the prospect of death itself-of death, the unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most-bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

Dr. Truman Davis gives an additional description of Jesus' crucifixion:

At this point another phenomenon occurs. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed, and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself to get even one short breath.

Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically He can push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the lifegiving oxygen. ...

Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber; then another agony begins. A deep crushing pain in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

It is now almost over ... the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. (**"The Crucifixion of Jesus; The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View," Arizona Medicine, 22, Mar. 1965, 183-87**)

The Lord was numbered among the sinful, He was sentenced just like the two thieves, on each side of Him. This was the cruelest and most gruesome act of capital punishment in the history of the world.

Jesus had proclaimed to be the Son of God, yet here he was suspended between heaven and earth. He had raised the dead, but he could not come down from that cross. He had told them that he could raise the temple up in three days, yet He did not come down from the cross. Yet, despite all that Jesus endured, (Heb 12:2, ESV)

says, – “...*looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

Calvary was the divine plan of God and as they cried for the Lord to come down from that cross, so that he could prove he was the Son of God, but that is why he **stayed on that cross**. The nails did not keep Jesus upon that cross, LOVE DID!

Jesus was on that cross from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. and hung there between heaven and earth for 6 long hours. He was made into nothing more than a spectacle, to be mocked, to be prodded, and to be the laughingstock of religious leaders, onlookers, and passersby. **Who were the characters around the cross that day?**

The first group is the . . .

I. CROWD OF APATHY

These were people who lacked any feeling or emotion; impassive; lack of concern or interest, they were indifferent.

Jerusalem was filled that week because of Passover. For many, they are simply spectators at a Roman crucifixion. Some did realize that something dramatic had occurred, but they went away, having not been affected by it. (Lk. 23:48)

A. THE SPECTATORS

The life of Christ was filled with spectators...people looking for a good show. So often churches have become auditoriums for spectators. The cry of the modern-day church has become “Entertain me!”

But let me warn you that being eyewitnesses to what God is doing doesn't mean you're a part of what God is doing. People through the ages have ridden church pews to hell...they were close to the cross but far from the blood.

Problem with SPECTATORS: TOO FAMILIAR WITH CROSS TO BE CHANGED BY IT.

Many have grown so familiar with that scene called Calvary that it no longer stirs their hearts. Maybe they were once drawn to the cross, but now they've slipped

in the crowd of spectators... present yet not in Christ's presence. They have refused to take up their own cross and follow Christ.

B. THE PASSERS-BY AT THE CROSS

These passers-by were only there temporarily. The only reason they came near the cross is that it was on the way to where they were headed. Their destination wasn't the cross... it was somewhere else that seemed more important.

Problem with PASSERS-BY: TOO BUSY TO INVESTIGATE CHRIST ON THE CROSS.

Quickly adopted the criticisms of the mockers because it was easiest and cost the least. People want Jesus to save them, but with no cost to them...don't want to surrender. If you miss every other appointment don't miss your appointment with to see the truth about Jesus...your eternity depends on it.

C. THE SOLDIERS AT THE CROSS

This was just another day, another execution, another job. They were paid to be there and to fill a specific responsibility.

And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, they parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

In the sight of Jesus, they rolled their dice and gambled for the only thing of physical value Jesus had. They were playing games while the savior of the world was just a few feet away.

Are you playing games with life while the blood of Jesus is available to you?

Problem with the SOLDIERS: TOO DISTRACTED and DETACHED TO REALLY SEE THE CROSS.

They were too busy doing their job to take note of the significance of who was on the cross. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves going through life just doing what we've already done and miss Jesus.

They were distracted by materialism. They were more concerned with the value of Jesus' clothing than the value of the Christ.

It may be time for you to stop with the fun and games and take a serious look at calvary.

ILLUSTRATION: A father and daughter were walking through a spacious prairie one day when they noticed in the distance, they could see fire all around them and closing in on them. They had nowhere to run. The father understood there was only one way to escape. He set fire to the ground near them and burned a large patch of the grass. When the huge fires drew near, they stood on the burned section. The little girl was scared, but the father drew here close as they stood in the middle of that burnt patch and he said **“The flames cannot get to us here. We are standing where the fire has already been.”**

We need not fear the wrath of God if we accept the finished work of Christ.

The one thing the Apathetic Crowd had in common was that they were eyewitnesses to the most important event in history; they knew what was happening but had no clue what was going on.

Many people today stand in the crowd of apathy around the cross. They hear the message, but it has no meaning, or effect on their life. Some have accepted Christ as Savior but have grown apathetic to the cause of Christ, and sit idly by, do nothing, unconcerned about a world that is sliding into hell.

The second group is the . . .

II. Crowd of Animosity

These were people full of hostility and open hatred toward Christ.

A. Religious Leaders

Sadducees - Hated JESUS' DOMINION over sickness, disease, and evil spirits.

Pharisees - Hated JESUS' DOCTRINE.

Priests - Hated JESUS' DEITY, claiming to be the Son of God

(John 11:53) - ***"From that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death."***

B. POLITICAL Leaders

Pontius Pilate - Worked for Rome. He was Ceasar's political pawn to deal with the Jews. He was a man who found not fault with Christ but went against what his wife had warned him about and against his own conscious.

(John 19:12, ESV) ***"From then on Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend."***

(Mark 15:15, ESV) ***"So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified."***

C. THE MOCKERS

The mocker will never be proved wrong because there will never be enough evidence. You see the mocker will not see because the mocker refuses to see. They cloaked their mockery in religious titles and clothing.

Many in the crowd that day mock Jesus out of spiteful motivation. (Mt. 27:39-40)

It had been reported widely that Jesus had said He could rebuild the Temple in 3 days. If He could rebuild the Temple in 3 days, surely, He could rescue Himself from the cross! He was talking about raising His body.

The mocking of Jesus by the religious leaders was religiously motivated. (Mt. 27:41:43)

This man had claimed to be the Messiah, the King, the Son of God. If He would come off the cross now, it would be proof that He was who he said. Through their derision, they admit that He "saved others!"

Of all the people that should have recognized Christ, the religious leaders should have. They had the biblical knowledge and the scriptural education.

Let me remind you that biblical knowledge will not save you, only Jesus can.

Problem with the RELIGIOUS LEADERS, POLITICAL LEADERS, AND MOCKERS: TOO CRITICAL TO SEE THE TRUTH OF THE CROSS.

The critic can only see what's wrong — never what's right. The mockers and naysayers are always the loudest ones there.

Mockers have attempted for thousands of years to silence Christ's finished work on the cross.

1 Cor. 1:18, ESV, ***“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”***

Many today are outwardly and openly hostile, opposing the work of Christ by every means possible. Others are hostile to Christ in ways they do not realize: Backbiting, gossiping about others, living a worldly lifestyle, or not being concerned about helping others.

The one thing the CRITICAL Crowd had in common was that they were religious but not redeemed, they were close but not changed.

Will you be in the crowd that is critical and mocks away your only hope?

The third group around the cross that day was the . . .

III. Crowd of Affection

Like those sentenced to die in every generation, Jesus had around the cross people who loved Him dearly.

(John 19:25-27, ESV) ***“...but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” 27Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.”***

Many other unnamed men and women were present, watching their Lord and Savior die a cruel death on the cross.

In which crowd do you find yourself today?

Are you apathetic, hostile, or loving? Romans 5:8: ***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

If you're in the wrong crowd, the good news is, you can switch!

STORY: There was a man in England over 200 years ago by the name of William Cowper. He had a nervous disposition and often struggled with bouts of severe depression. At one point he became extremely depressed, fearing that he was under the wrath of God. "I flung myself into a chair by the window and there saw the Bible on the table by the chair. I opened it up and my eyes fell on Romans 3:25, which says of Christ, ***'Whom God has made a propitiation through faith in his blood.'*** I realized what Christ's blood had accomplished and I trusted Jesus Christ and a great burden was lifted from my soul."

Looking back on that day, William Cowper wrote a hymn that we still sing today:

There is a fountain filled with blood.

Drawn from Immanuel's veins.

And sinners plunged beneath that flood.

Lose all their guilty stain.

ILLUSTRATION: If you were to look at **Rembrandt's painting of The Three Crosses**, your attention would be drawn first to the center cross on which Jesus died.

Then as you would look at the crowd gathered around the foot of that cross, you'd be impressed by the various facial expressions and actions of the people involved.

Finally, your eyes would drift to the edge of the painting and catch sight of another figure, almost hidden in the shadows. Art critics say this is a picture of Rembrandt himself, for he recognized by his sins he helped nail Jesus to the cross.

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Yes! We all were.

Closing Illustration: There is little town in Alabama where the major livelihood used to be raising cotton. One year, when everyone thought, they were going to

have a bumper crop, a little insect called the “boll weevil” invaded, devastated the crop, and destroyed the economy of that little town.

One man got the idea that he could plant peanuts instead, because boll weevils don’t like peanuts. Another farmer decided to plant peanuts and others followed suit and before long, bumper crops of peanuts began to repair the economy of that town. The town later became known as ‘Enterprise, Alabama’. They later erected a monument to the boll weevil because they looked at the boll weevil not as a curse, but as a blessing.

In the same way the Cross was a despised object in Jesus’ day - but it has become the symbol of the Christian faith and object of our joy and salvation.

Max Lucado – “No Wonder They Call Him the Savior”

“The cross! It rests on the timeline of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. It’s hope lures all searchers... History has idolized it and despised it, gold-plated it and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything to it but ignore it. That’s the one option that the cross does not offer. No one can ignore it! You can’t ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. Its bottom line is sobering: ...if the account is true, it is history’s hinge. Period. ... If not, it is history’s hoax. That’s why the cross matters.”

(1Peter 1:18-19 ESV) ***“knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”***

(2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV) ***“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”***

Has the blood of Jesus ever been applied to your heart? He shed His blood and what was a place of judgment is now a mercy seat for you and me.