



## TIME OF GRACE®

# *Churchy Words Explained (and Why You Should Care): Cross*

## Study Notes

### *Summary*

Few things are as trendy as the cross. Pastors, bikers, and pop stars tattoo crosses on their bodies, an artistic shape that seems to mean all things to all people. But what did the cross mean in Jesus' die? When we confess that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate," what images should come into our minds? This message goes back to the origins of the cross and the stunning message that the King of heaven died on one for the forgiveness of our sins.

#### 1. The Cross

- "What shall I say of crucifying [a Roman citizen]? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it."—Cicero

#### 2. His Cross

- **Philippians 2:8:** He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
- **Isaiah 53:5:** He was pierced for our transgressions . . . and by his wounds we are healed.
- **1 Peter 2:24:** "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross.
- **Colossians 2:14:** [He] canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.
- **Colossians 1:20:** [God made] peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
- **1 Corinthians 1:18:** To us who are being saved [the message of the cross] is the power of God.

#### 3. Our Cross.

- **Mark 8:34:** Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

## *Points to Ponder*

1. In what ways is “doing life together” a true joy for Christians? In what ways is loving other people a “cross” that requires self-denial as we follow Christ?
2. As we approach the season before Easter, read Matthew chapters 26-28 to capture more of the story of Jesus’ suffering and resurrection. Extra credit if you also read Mark chapters 14-16, Luke chapters 22-24, and chapters John 18-21.

## *Homework for Next Week*

Read John 8:32 and John 17:17.

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So, do you know what, Bieber, Tupac, a local pastor, a high-end fashion designer, and motorcycle riders have in common? Their interest in it, the cross. It is pretty curious, isn't it? Can you think of many other things in life that would unite such a diverse group of people like that? I mean, heartthrob, teenage boy band style, hardcore gangster rapper throwing up gang signs and dropping all kinds of expletives. It is pretty rare that those all come together, but at the cross, it actually does. And that is why today I want to slow down just a little bit and think - well, what exactly does that symbol mean? Right? If pop stars can use it, and gangster rappers can use it, and high-end fashion designers love it, and gritty guys in motorcycle jackets love it, too, and local pastors put it on, and people have earrings and Pinterest-y Christian t-shirts with it, what exactly does it, the cross, mean to people?

I want to ask you that question today because one of my greatest hopes and one of my greatest fears as a pastor are really closely connected. One of my greatest hopes is not just that you would come to church, or not just that you would stream online or watch on TV. One of my greatest hopes is not just that I would get to speak words to you and you would hear words from me, or we would read words from a book or sing words in a song. My greatest hope as a pastor is that you would not just hear words, but really get words. Which is why today I really want to slow down and think about that word that I love, that Bieber loves, that Tupac loved, that Dolce & Gabbana loves - the word, "the cross." What exactly does that mean? Because I am absolutely convinced that if you get the cross - like, you know what it was, you know what it does, you know what it did, you know what it can do - that God can change you in really profound ways.

And if you do not get it, you can see it, you can wear it, we can put one up, you could even ink it on yourself, and miss all of the power, and the comfort, and the passion that God intended when his one and only son died on a cross. If you get the cross, you will understand why the words that you speak after church today matter so infinitely much. If you get the cross, you will understand the kindness, and the love, and the compassion, and the grace, and the power of God. He will not just be some higher power, he will be your lifeline, your savior, your gracious king, and your everything. And if you get the cross, you will really get what is coming ahead of you in your life as a Christian. You will not be shocked when marriage is difficult. You will not be deeply offended when the world does not celebrate and applaud everything that you stand for. You will not be disillusioned and kind of bitter at God that life this side of heaven is very difficult. If you grasp what the Bible says about the word, "cross," all of it will make sense. You will get you, you will get God, you will get life, if you get the cross.

So, if you can forgive me for keeping it simple today, I want to unpack the cross in three simple parts. You engineering, organized, mental types, pay attention here. First of all, we are going to talk about the cross. Second, we are going to talk about his cross. And third, we are going to talk about our cross. We will talk about the cross and crucifixion in general. Let us talk about his cross, the crucifixion of Jesus. And let us talk about our cross that we carry as we follow him.

In Psalm 22, which was a prediction of the coming Savior, King David wrote about the Savior being pierced in his hands and feet, 1000 B.C. And in the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 53, it says that the Savior would, "be pierced for our transgressions," written about 700 B.C., and both of those instances come before the first non-biblical mention of a cross in 522 B.C. by the Greek historian Herodotus. In other words, the Bible talks about crucifixion before crucifixion had even been invented, which is one of the reasons why Christians like me kind of think that the Bible was not just written by people, but that is a sermon for another day.

In 522, the Greek historian Herodotus said that the Persians conquered this rebellious ruler. They killed him, and after he was dead, they nailed him up on a cross - the first recorded crucifixion in human history. If you fast-forward about 500 years, however, to the Romans, you will really understand what the Persians started. The Roman government used the cross to scare people into submission. Their goal was not to be nice, not to be humane, not to respect the inherent dignity and human rights of all people. No, the Romans tinkered with the torture of the cross to terrify potential rebels into putting down their swords, bending their knees, and paying their taxes. And so, their goal was to make death by crucifixion the most unthinkable, graphic, nauseating - like, throw up a little bit in your mouth when you see it and when you grasp its kind of torture, so that everyone would be obedient to the Roman Empire.

And so, here is what they did. They figured out a way to make a person suffer the worst possible as long as possible. They would normally start by taking a whip or a stiff rod and beating a man - they rarely ever did it to a woman - across the shoulders, the back, the buttocks, and the legs. The beating would be so bad that his flesh would hang like little ribbons, and sometimes he would barely survive. And then, they would throw the crossbeam of a cross over his shoulders and make him carry it, as his body starts to go into shock, out to the place of crucifixion. And there, they would pound nails, like big railroad spikes, right about here, and here, and somewhere around here. A scientist, I think in the 1920's, he experimented on dead corpses. He tried to reenact a crucifixion, and he figured out that if you put a nail in the center of a palm, like you sometimes see in the Bible movies or Jesus pictures, it will just rip through the flesh. And so, the theory is that when the Romans crucified someone, they would put it here where the bones could hold them up. If you just think about that for a moment, like nail on nerves, the rough edges of a railroad spike literally pressing into the bone.

Back in 2007, the second archeological evidence of a crucifixion was discovered. They found, like the plates of a man's heel bone right here, and in the middle of it was a perfectly round hole where they believe a nail was smashed right through the bone into the wood of a cross to hold him up. And once the nails were driven through the hands and the feet, you would be lifted up on a cross, and while we might assume what would kill you would be the loss of blood, it was not. What would kill you would be the loss of breath. To ease some of the pain from the nails driven

through, you would allow your body to slump down, but here it would be hard to breathe. And so, the only way to get a breath was to push, nail on nerve, hoist yourself up - and then slump again.

If you ever experienced shocking pain, you know that your instinct is to hold your breath, right? So, you had to fight the very natural reaction of your body just to breathe, bit by bit, by bit, by bit, by bit, until you suffocated literally on your own breath. Now, the Romans wanted you to be their public service announcement, and so, they experimented with that kind of agony, what would allow a person to suffer the most and the longest. And one thing they discovered is if they put a small seat kind of beneath your backside, you could not slump too far and suffocate too fast. And so, it would allow you just to choke a little bit and survive, most of the time, from two to three days. By the way, you would also be stripped totally naked. The goal was to embarrass and to shame you. Jesus was most likely crucified in the nude.

And the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2 that Jesus, God in human flesh, humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. It is mentally almost impossible to wrap your brain around the fact that the God of heaven could walk among us as a human being. What is way more shocking than that is the thought that when God walked among us as a human being, he could be hurt, even killed, even be put to death. And what is a billion times more shocking than that is that God - holy, good, pure, compassionate, loving, kind, humble, everything - would die on a cross. That the one and only time in human history when God had a body, it ended up in a place like that. To think of Jesus, like turn-the-other-cheek Jesus, love your neighbor Jesus, washing feet Jesus, that his human nerves would be pressed by a Roman nail - to think of Jesus, stripped, shamed, spit on, his holy flesh covered in human filth...how?

A couple of years ago, I was leading a church service at a Christian college in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and it was one of those formal kinds of churches. They had a big altar up front, and they had this beautiful golden cross about this high, right on top of the altar. And near the end of the service, I approached the altar. I folded my hands and I started to pray. And at one point, I remember I looked up into the cross and I saw my own reflection. Except, just because of the way the cross was made, its contours and the metal, I saw my own face, but it was twisted. It was disturbing. It was grotesque. It was a kind of me that I did not like to see, and I could only see it when I looked at the cross.

And that is what the Bible says about the cross of Jesus. You know, the cross is just some trendy tattoo church symbol, jewelry, until you look at it and realize, I... I did that to God. And all of the things that we tend to say to ourselves, "I am a pretty good person," "Nobody is perfect," "Sorry, I am not Jesus," it just stops making sense. Like, can you imagine if you were there on that day? And there is Jesus, and he is gasping, and he is dying. He has just thrown up on himself and you say, "Hey, nobody is perfect, right?" When you see his cross, it just hits you, like right in the soul. Like, it is that bad. It is that bad. When I try to get what I want in marriage, it is that bad. If Jesus had to die for my sins and that is what it took, then sin, my sin, is that bad. And so, today, I just want to give you about thirty seconds with God. I want you to just stare at that cross and just think. Right? Let it hit you. Let your imagination go back to that place where it is not just some church symbol, some decoration, but see... see God there. And think about what it means if God

died on a cross. And while you are looking at the cross, do not miss one last thing - the most amazing love in the whole universe.

This morning, I had a cup of coffee with a guy who is reading the Bible for the first time, and we talked about sin, and it was like he was seeing it for the first time, his self, his struggle, his sin. I told him about Jesus, God going to a cross for it, and his just gut emotional reaction was, "Whoa, that is the kindest thing!" I said, "Yeah, I know." Like, you would think lightning bolts would come down from heaven if we did that to God's one and only son. Instead, no, the love of God, and the patience of God, and the beauty of God - Jesus, as God, could have pushed pause on the power of gravity. He could have stopped all of it, but he did not. And the Bible says this is the reason why - because of his love. Because your mama might have loved you, and your daddy might have loved you. Your significant other might say they love you. But no one in history, no one in the universe, has loved you like that, and that is what you will know if you get the cross.

The other day, I looked up every single passage that mentioned the word, "the cross," "the crucifixion of Jesus." Well, let me machine gun at you what I learned. I learned this. In Isaiah 53, it says, "He was pierced for our transgressions, and by his wounds, we are healed." Jesus Christ, wounded at the cross, he healed us. No more shame, no more eternal spiritual wound. Everything that was broken, wounded, bleeding between us and God, it is healed.

The New Testament said this. "Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross." He bore them. That means you and I do not have to carry them. We do not have to drag them along. We do not have to define ourselves by them. He took them, and he was pierced for them on a cross.

And then, Paul jumped in in the joy. He said, "Jesus canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." Took it away. No more guilt. No more going into God's courtroom with fear and trembling. No, no, no, that is all gone, because as Paul would go on to say, "God made peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Anyone who believes in the cross of Jesus has this - peace with God. I am okay, we are okay, it is going to be okay because of the cross.

And if that were not enough, I will give you one more. Paul said, "To us who are being saved, the message of the cross is the power of God."

Put it all together. Through the cross, we have peace, we have healing, we have forgiveness, we have sins taken away. There is no condemnation. There is more peace. There is salvation. There is power. That is what is loaded into the word, "the cross," and that is why we preach it, that is why we sing it, that is why we post it, that is why we ink it, that is why we wear it. That is why we cling to it. That is why we will never let go of it.

And that, friends, is why we love the cross of Jesus Christ. Through the cross of Jesus, you and I are alive. We skip down the street knowing we are forgiven, and there is nothing in all of creation that can change that simple fact. So, get a tattoo after church is done. Buy a t-shirt. Let Tupac inspire you. I do not know what you have got to do, but I know this. You will never, ever, ever, ever regret getting as close to the cross as you can.

It makes me think of Pizza Ranch. Some of you know the story. A few years ago, I am sitting at a Pizza Ranch with my little kids, and I notice this young woman in the booth next to me with this little cross tattoo behind her ear, and the words, "Not for Sale." And being curious and being an extrovert, I said, "What does that mean?" She said, "You got time to talk?" So, a few days later, she came to church and she told me the almost unbelievable story that she had grown up in Australia, and tragically, had been trafficked. And for years, she had been bought and sold, and bought and sold, by very twisted men. And then, in a kind of escape that could only be God, she got a secret internet account, met a Christian man in America who orchestrated her escape from sex trafficking. He saved her from that life. And the man knew Jesus, and he told her about the cross, about a God that can save you from shame, a God who can make you believe you are worthy and beautiful, a God who can make you believe that you have value and an eternal future. He told her about the cross of Jesus Christ. And so, she ran to get her tattoo, a little cross and the words, "Not for Sale." I have been bought at the cross of Jesus Christ, and the only Lord, the only owner, the only master, the only king I have is the king of love who gave his life for me on a cross.

Jesus spoke these shocking words in Mark 8 to his closest friends. He said, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their... the cross, and follow me." "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves." Well, you do not get to do what you want, you do not get to say what you want, you do not get to just embrace what you feel when there are desires, and words, and thoughts, and goals within you that you must deny, Jesus said. It will feel like a crucifixion, right?

And some of you get this. You just want to go off on people. You want to drink. You have sexual desires. There are things that you think about the authorities, about your parents, about your ex. And to not do those things, it feels like death, doesn't it? It is agonizing, it is excruciating, but do not be shocked by it. Because when you pick up your cross to follow Jesus, not only do you have honest expectations of life, but you get to follow Jesus. And the early Christians knew, whatever this costs us, a physical cross or just an emotional one, he is Jesus. And if he would go to a cross for a sinner like me, he is worth it. So, I will leave you with this question. How good must heaven be? If Jesus said, "I will make you the best trade in the world. You pick up a cross every day, and I will give you God." I love that thought. How good must God be?

To just see his face for a second - how good must he be? If all of the drama of life, all of the stuff that we go through, all of the persecution of the Christian church, all of the desires that you fight every day - if the second you see the face of God through his son, Jesus Christ, if it is all worth it - if you break out in song and sing, "Holy, holy, holy," and, "Worthy, worthy, worthy," dream with me for a second. How good...how good must God be?

The Old Testament said it like this. "God, better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere." Give me three years of all-expense paid vacation. It is not nearly as good as one day in the courts of God, in the presence of God, seeing the face of God. So, brothers and sisters, I say this to you - suffer well. It is worth it. Do not flip out, do not be shocked, do not be surprised.

Loving people is hard. Putting God first is difficult. It feels like a crucifixion, but it is not in vain. And one day, when you see his face, you will believe it. That is the cross.

Let us pray.

Dear Jesus, I think that I love people in my life. I think of what I would suffer for them, and I cannot wrap my brain around that level of pain that you willingly went through.

Jesus, as God, you could have flown off the cross. You could have ripped out the nails and fought the whole Roman Empire by yourself, but you did not. You sat there. You restrained your power. You humbled yourself and died on a cross. Lord, that hits us deeply and it moves us profoundly.

I thank you for a kind of love like this world has never seen. I thank you that that message has traveled through 2,000 years and reached us today. And now I pray, after this word, God, that every time we see it, we think of it. We unload that word and what we find in the end is the pure weight of your love, your kindness, and your glory.

Father, may the cross strip us of any belief that we are just fine on our own. If this is the price of sin, then we are not. But even more, heavenly Father, as we stare at the cross and fix our eyes upon it, may we believe that for the rest of our lives that we are so profoundly loved that we would never need anything in this world from anyone.

Jesus, you said it might be a tough road ahead. Every day, we are going to have to pick up our own cross as we follow you, but I dream of the day when I see your face. I have looked into the face of my daughters, and my wife, and my friends, and felt such joy, and they are people. What will happen, Jesus, when we see your divine face?

And because of the cross and the wounds that we see in your hands and feet, that there is no disappointment or anger there, there is just love. We ache for that day, God, but we will see that day. The cross of Jesus Christ is the reason that we are alive.

So, God, today we put all of our hopes, our goals, our dreams, our wealth, in the cross. We know that we have it and nothing can change it, so thank you for unfailing love. We pray this all, Jesus, through your name, through your blood, through your cross. And all God's people who agreed, they said, "Amen."