

John at the Cross

The Alexamenos Graffiti is an ancient piece of graffiti engraved into a wall in ancient Rome. It depicts a man lifting his arm in a sign of reverence and worship. To his right we see what he is worshipping: it is a donkey on a cross. Underneath this picture is the inscription: Alexamenos worships his god. Alexamenos was undoubtedly a Christian, and this picture is graffiti written by someone who knew him, mocking him.

Now where did that come from? Why would a Roman guard or servant or soldier look over at a man he knew to be a Christian, and take the time to mock him with this drawing?

The answer is that the cross was a repulsive and shameful symbol. Any religion that made a crucified leader its god was foolishness to the Greeks and Romans. For the ancient Romans, this was so ridiculous, that they called Christians – *assenarii* – donkey worshippers.

You see, the 2000 years between us and Christ's time have changed our understanding of what the cross meant. Since then, the cross has been made into an ornament, blazoned on warriors' shields and countries' flags, become a superstitious sign to bring good luck and cure disease. The cross has been sanitised.

Crucifixion was not simply a form of execution in Roman times. Crucifixion, on the other hand, was a form of death by torture and humiliation. Crucified persons were usually stripped naked, and often placed along highways for people to see. The shame, stigma and humiliation associated with crucifixion was such that the very mention of crucifixion was considered impolite in Roman society.

It's only when we understand this that we can see the huge irony in phrases like “boasting in the cross” or “knowing nothing except Christ and Him crucified”. And it's for that same reason that the Gospel writers take us in slow, almost agonising detail to the cross. We are meant to feel a tension that is almost unbearable: the Lord of glory, subjected to the ultimate humiliation. We are meant to feel that this day was the greatest paradox in the history of the world: the greatest beauty reduced to the greatest shame, the most glorious reduced to the most repulsive.

And we should sense that this is where the problem of evil is solved. Here is where sin and evil is dealt with: in all the contradictions and chaos of Calvary: where the Prince of Life submits to death, where the Lord of glory is smeared with the filth of our sin, where the Creator suffers for His creation.

Of all the apostles, John is the only one who can say that he was actually at the cross. The others fled in Gethsemane; Peter left and wept bitterly once he had denied the Lord three times. It appears it was only John that followed all the events. John, it seems, accompanied the mother of Jesus to the cross, with several other women, and remained there the entire time. John gives us close-up of the shame, the pain, the ugliness.

John does not simply repeat what Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us, but fills in the details they did not. John will take us *to* the cross, show us what was *above* the cross, who was *around* the cross, who was *before* the cross, what was said *from* the cross, and even what was shown *after* the cross.

Our goal again is to look, watch, admire. It is to understand that this is the Word, the only begotten of God, and John said, we have seen His glory. Not a shining light, but even more so here, bleeding, fading, and dying.

I. The Struggle to the Cross

¹⁷ And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called *the Place* of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, ¹⁸ where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center.

Having been handed over by Pontius Pilate, Jesus is now marched off to the place called Golgotha, Place of the Skull. In Latin, the word for skull is Calvaria, where we get the name we often use. This was very likely a rock quarry, just outside the city walls of the time. Rock quarries were also a place for tombs, where quarried-out areas were bought to become family tombs. Almost certainly, Joseph of Arimathea had a tomb a stone's-throw from where men were crucified.

One of the humiliations that the Romans added to execution by crucifixion was to have the condemned man carry the tool of his own execution. An entire cross was more than one man could carry, but the horizontal beam to which a man's arms and wrists were nailed was placed on a man to carry. We know from the other Gospels that the sleep-deprived, bleeding, scourged, beaten body of Jesus buckled under the strain, and a man named Simon of Cyrene was co-opted to carry the cross the rest of the way.

Indeed, this was the image Jesus had called upon when teaching His disciples and us. "If any man will come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." The man carrying his cross was on the way to his own death, and so Jesus' audience understood what He meant was, "Die to your own life, die to your selfish dreams, be executed, and come to Me".

Once there, the man was thrown to the ground, his arms tied with ropes, and then a 4-6 inch iron spike hammered through the space between hand and wrist, and a longer spike used to hammer through the ankles, one foot placed over the other.

II. The Superscription Above the Cross

¹⁹ Now Pilate wrote a title and put *it* on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS ²⁰ Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, *and* Latin. ²¹ Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews,' but, 'He said, "I am the King of the Jews."'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

Pilate here no doubt took some revenge on the Jews who had blackmailed him into executing Jesus. He places the sign over Jesus that identified Him as the King of the Jews, written in three languages – Hebrew, the language of the local population, Greek, the spoken trade language of the whole world, and Latin, the language of the Roman military stationed them. It was common for a sign to be placed over the heads of the crucified, identifying them and their crime. So the Sanhedrin wanted Pilate to write that Jesus had claimed to be the King of the Jews. Instead, Pilate simply writes, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

On the one hand, perhaps Pilate felt that this noble, meek, wise man was indeed the best of his nation, and the truest king he had ever met. On the other, he wanted to take revenge on the Jews by scorning them with the sight of a crucified man, with the title: King of the Jews. And when they demand that Pilate change the sign, he finally finds his courage and refuses. What I've written, I've written.

And so in God's providence, the jealous feuding and politicking between Pilate and the Sanhedrin resulted in a title that was entirely accurate: this is Jesus, the King of the Jews. That's exactly who He was, Messiah, David's Son and David's Lord, the government upon His shoulder.

III. The Soldiers Around the Cross

²³ Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. ²⁴ They said therefore among themselves, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be," that the Scripture might be fulfilled which says: "*They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots.*" Therefore the soldiers did these things.

It was actually Roman procedure to assign four soldiers to each crucified man. The crucified man's clothes would then be divided up four ways: belt, sandals, head covering, and robe. But then there was this fifth item, the tunic, and because it was seamless, it was a shame to tear it up four ways, so they decided to gamble for it. In this they fulfilled the Scripture from Psalm 22:18.

The Lord Jesus once said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air *have* nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay *His* head." (Matthew 8:20)

He did not own much, and here are his last and only earthly possessions being taken, and gambled for.

IV. The Spectators Before the Cross

²⁵ Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the *wife* of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" ²⁷ Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own *home*.

It appears there were at least four women at the cross: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene. Mary the wife of Clopas, and Salome, the mother of James and John. Salome seems to have been the sister of Mary, making her Jesus' aunt, and James and John his cousins.

Jesus says to Mary, "Behold your son", He is not referring to Himself on the cross. He is referring to the apostle John standing next to her. That's how John speaks about himself in his Gospel: the disciple whom Jesus loved. Jesus says to Mary, "Look, John is now your adopted son!" To John, He says, "Look, Mary is now your adopted mother!"

What is Jesus doing? In the culture of ancient Israel, if a husband died, and the widow did not remarry, it became the responsibility of her eldest son to take care of her. At some point before Jesus began His ministry, His adopted father Joseph had died. Apparently, all through His ministry, Jesus had been making sure His mother Mary was taken care of. But now it comes to the end, and He can no longer fulfil that responsibility. What does Jesus do? Does He cry bitter tears that He is dying before His mother does? Does He ask her for sympathy? No, there on the cross, Jesus is sorting out the affairs of His household, making sure Mary will be financially provided for. He turns to His closest friend, the disciple He trusts the most, and entrusts His mother to his care. And verse 27 says, And from that hour that disciple took her to his own *home*.

What about the other brothers of Jesus? Why do they not take this responsibility? Well, perhaps they did, when she was up in Galilee. But here, down in Jerusalem, it appears John had more connections, being known the High Priest. Or perhaps their unbelief in Jesus had created a rift in the family, and Jesus needed to entrust His mother to a disciple, instead of the next eldest. Whatever it was, it is amazing compassion. In His time of agony, where every breath is an effort, and everything said must be forced out with searing pain, Jesus speaks kindness to His mother.

V. The Speech From the Cross

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!"

Notice how John connects what Jesus knows about things being accomplished and fulfilled with the what Jesus said next. What does Jesus knowing that He had accomplished everything and wanting to fulfil all prophecy have to do with saying He is thirsty?

Well, it appears this has to do with what Jesus will next. What Jesus would say next was so important that Jesus could not risk it being unheard or misheard because of a dry, almost moistureless throat. Crucifixion would have brought severe dehydration. First, through the loss of blood of the scourging beforehand. Second, the forced exhalation because of the unnatural chest position would have exacerbated it. It's likely that Jesus had almost no saliva in his mouth, and nothing to lubricate the vocal cords. Whatever He tries to say now will come out as a hoarse whisper. But Jesus does not want to whisper something; He wants to shout an announcement.

The announcement has to do with knowing all things are now accomplished, and that the Scripture is now fulfilled. But to make the announcement, Jesus asks for something to drink. He is fully human as well as fully God. And here we see His humanity: needy, dependent, vulnerable, experiencing weakness. He cannot simply swallow or chew and make this happen. His arms are nailed and He cannot meet His own need and drink something. He asks for help so that He can make the announcement.

²⁹ Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put *it* on hyssop, and put *it* to His mouth.

This sour wine or vinegar is not to be confused with the wine mixed with myrrh that they offered Jesus on the way to the cross, which He refused. That mixture was meant to be a painkiller, and meant to provide some relief. Jesus refused that, intent on facing all that the cross was, without an anesthetic. But here He wets his mouth and throat, so that He can speak.

³⁰ So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" (Jn. 19:30)

After Jesus' mouth and tongue and throat is ready, Jesus makes this announcement. But the interesting thing is that while John's Gospel tells us *what* He said, and the other three Gospels tell us *how* He said it.

⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, (Matt. 27:50)

³⁷ And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, (Mk. 15:37)

⁴⁶ And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, (Lk. 23:46)

The other Gospel writers say that Jesus' loudest word was this one. But it wasn't a meaningless cry of pain, an exclamation of inarticulate noise. It wasn't a groan or a shriek. Jesus shouted out the words that John records for us.

What were those words? In the Greek, it is one word: tetelestai. "It has been finished" "It is completed". It can also mean "It has been fully paid." What was Jesus announcing? He was announcing that what He came to do had just been done.

His mission from the Father was not to merely teach, or do miracles, or be an example. The real mission was to die on the cross. His crucifixion had not defeated or thwarted the goal God had set out for Him. Far from it: He had now won. He had accomplished the main goal: paying the full

penalty for sins. They were paid in full, past, present and future, the entire sin debt. Whereas Satan and the forces of darkness thought they were winning as they killed Jesus, here in this moment, Jesus sent a shockwave through the entire satanic army: because Jesus shouted in victory. They had no idea that by putting Jesus on the cross, they were actually fulfilling God's plan. Paul said this was because none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor. 2:7-8)

In fact, so clear was this victory shout, that it resulted in the conversion of the centurion who had been in charge of the crucifixion.

³⁹ So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, **saw that He cried out like this** and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15:39)

The centurion saw a man shouting in victory, a man who had actually manoeuvred events so as to be on the cross, a man who had won it all by being a victim. The centurion realised this man had not been defeated; this man had just conquered everything.

³⁰ And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. (John 19:30)

“This was in keeping with Christ’s own statement, “I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:17,18). Christ did not die because life slowly ebbed from His veins. His life was not taken from Him. Christ died because by an act of His will He dismissed His soul from His body. Christ was sovereign over His death as He was sovereign over His resurrection (Jn 10:17,18).” – J. Dwight Pentecost

VI. The Sign After the Cross

³¹ Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away. ³² Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. ³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. ³⁵ And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. ³⁶ For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, “*Not one of His bones shall be broken.*” ³⁷ And again another Scripture says, “*They shall look on Him whom they pierced.*” (John 19:17–37)

Preparation Day was Friday, and the next day was a High Sabbath because it coincided with the sheaf offering on the second day of the Passover feast. Crucified men were usually left on the cross, which could actually take days, and often by dehydration or asphyxiation, not blood loss. Bodies were often left on crosses to be devoured by vultures.

The Jews did not want crucified men hanging during the feast, as Deuteronomy 21:22-23 forbade having a person hanged on a gibbet remain there overnight

If it was necessary to hasten death, as it was in this case, the Romans would use an iron mallet and perform what they called *crurifragium*. They would smash the legs, which produced more blood loss and trauma. But broken legs prevented the crucified man from pushing down on the small ledge placed below his feet, which allowed them to breathe properly. Without being able to push down, the man would not be able to open his chest, and would succumb to death by suffocation.

They began on either side of Jesus, hastening the death of the two criminals, the one who had

repented and received forgiveness from Christ, the other who had remained hardened. But when they came to Christ, they found him already dead. That was unusual: death after six hours of crucifixion was considered quick. So a soldier took a spear, and plunged it into his side. The goal was to awaken or jolt one who was merely comatose, but also to penetrate under the rib cage up to the heart, and make doubly sure that if he were not dead, this wound would make sure of it.

As he did so, a remarkable thing happened. So remarkable, that in verse 35, John insists that he was at the cross and saw it with his own eyes, and that he is telling the truth. From the wound that the soldier made came forth blood and water. The medical experts have different suggestions. One is that pericardial fluid had filled up the lungs of Jesus. A second is that Jesus suffered cardiac rupture, : an actual burst of the ventricular free wall. What ever it was, John reports the phenomenon, not the cause: flowing out of Jesus' lifeless body was both blood and water.

John wanted to emphasise that Jesus was truly human, and had truly died. But it's been hard for people not see some symbolic significance in John seeing this phenomenon. In Exodus 17 there is the incident where striking the Rock brings forth water.

The hymn-writer captured this in these words:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from its guilt and power.

Save me from sin's guilt, and sin's power.

John sees a fulfilment of two Scriptures here. The first could be either Numbers 9:12 where it is said that the Passover Lamb's bones must not be broken, or possibly (Psalm 34:20) ²⁰ He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken. The second Scripture is clearly Zechariah 12:10 ¹⁰ “ then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for *his* only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. (Zechariah 12:10)

John has not commented much through this narrative. He's showed us the struggle, the superscription, the soldiers, the spectators, the speech, and the sign around the cross. But his only comment, repeated three times in this passage was “That the Scripture might be fulfilled”. This was prophesied, planned, predicted. This was God's predestined plan to demonstrate His love, to prove His love is greater than our sin, His grace is greater than our evil, His beauty triumphs over sin's ugliness. He has given us a close up of the ugliness, that we might understand what our sin brought, and what His love was willing to do.

Ye who think of sin but lightly,
Nor suppose the evil great,
Here may view its nature rightly,
Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the Sacrifice appointed!
See Who bears the awful load!
'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed,
Son of Man, and Son of God.

That's why we gladly take our place with Alexamenos, so misunderstood by his contemporaries.
We worship the God who died on a cross. We believe this ultimate paradox is the ultimate solution.
This ultimate inversion is the ultimate correction. We boast in the cross, we glory in its message.