

The Shame of the Cross

There is some ancient graffiti, known as the Alexamenos Graffiti. It was engraved into a wall in ancient Rome. It mocks a Christian named Alexamenos. Alexamenos is the man on the left, lifting his arm in a sign of reverence and worship. Who is Alexamenos worshipping? He is worshipping a god being crucified. For the ancient Romans, this was so ridiculous, that they called Christians – Assenarii – donkey worshippers. As you can see in the picture, the object of Alexamenos' worship is a donkey.

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.

We find it very hard to understand how differently people in biblical times saw the cross. If we understand the shame that was attached to the cross, we can better understand why the writers of Scripture call us to boast in the cross, to despise its shame, to go outside the camp and bear His reproach.

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. When someone was executed, most often he was beheaded, or even given poison to drink. Beheading is quick and without much pain or humiliation. Crucifixion, on the other hand, was a form of death by torture and humiliation. Crucifixion would result in agonising pain, that could last for hours or even days. Crucified persons were usually stripped naked, and often placed along highways for people to see. Very often, crucified men were not buried, but left on the cross to decompose and be destroyed by birds, animals and insects. One of the ancient Romans named Quintillian wrote, "whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where most people can see and be moved by this fear. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect." Sometimes, the body would be thrown on the city's garbage heap.

Thieves were not crucified, unless some kind of rape or murder had accompanied their theft. Roman citizens could not be crucified. Middle and upper class people could not be crucified. Crucifixion was so humiliating, so distasteful, so obnoxious, that only the poor, the slaves, the rebellious from other nations could be crucified. The Roman statesman Cicero called it "the most cruel and disgusting penalty" (Verrem 2:5.165). The Bible knows that death by crucifixion was no normal death, it was the most humiliating of deaths.

Philippians 2:8 *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*

To see a crucified man was to see someone who had offended the world in the deepest way, and had been condemned to the lowest, most obscene and painful death man could invent. A man condemned to crucifixion would be, in our day, the serial child rapist and murderer, the Nazi torturer, the genocidal maniac.

So try to imagine a world where the word *cross* or *crucify* means filthy, vile criminal worthy of torture, humiliation and death, and then try to imagine telling those people that the Creator of the universe just recently was crucified on a cross.

To the average person who heard the gospel, the cross meant two things:

The Cross Meant Scandal

Gal 5:11 *And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased.*

That word 'offense' in Galatians 5:11 is the Greek word σκάνδαλον. It means that which is so offensive, that it arouses anger, disapproval, or stumbling. So you would be witnessing to someone about sin and the need for atonement, and they would be fine with it and agreeing, and then you get to the cross, and it would be the place where the person stumbles. How can the means to forgiveness be by someone who was crucified. That's hard to take. That's distasteful. That's gruesome and it smacks of death and blood and torture, and it doesn't sound like a tasteful, civilised religion.

The Cross Meant Ridicule

1 Corinthians 1:18 *For 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.*

1 Corinthians 1:23 *but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,*

The word *foolishness* is the Greek μωρία. This word refers to intellectual nonsense, foolishness, silliness. It is what is so idiotic that you dismiss it. The idea that salvation could be through a man dying on a cross was simply ridiculous to the proud of that age.

It would be like this in our age: if South Africa decided to reintroduce hanging for the crimes of first degree murder, rape and child sexual abuse. The gallows are reserved for premeditated murder, and violation of women and children. And the gallows are the symbol of our society's outrage at such behaviour. Now picture a new religion which begins, where the founder was recently hanged by the South African government. And instead of being ashamed, these people act like he is still alive, sing about him, and talk about him. And then they talk about the gallows, and boast in it, and sing about it, and draw pictures of it. And when you visit their place of worship, you see big representations of the gallows.

In other words, the heart of Christianity was something socially unacceptable to your average person in Greek and Roman times. The heart of Christianity was something shameful. The gospel, the beating heart of Christianity, is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The crucifixion is not a side-issue, it is central. The hinge on which the whole thing swings, the doorway into Christianity is this disgraceful, horrible, disgusting, distasteful thing. It is embarrassing, humiliating, and shameful.

So when your message is so shameful, and so unacceptable, and so filled with stigma, what are you going to do? How did the church deal with the fact that the gospel itself was scandalous and ridiculous to the average man? Did they decide to play down the fact that Jesus had been crucified lest it alienate their listeners? Did they try to focus on the nicer parts of the message so as to connect with the middle and upper classes of society? Did they rework the message so that the gruesome cross was not the main focus, but rather the happy, life-giving message? Did they repackage the message to avoid being ridiculed, mocked, misunderstood or slandered?

Galatians 6:12-14 *As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Question: When something is shameful, what do you do with it? You try to hide it, you try to conceal it. It embarrasses you, so you keep it hidden. On the other hand, when there is something you are very proud of, what are you tempted to do with it? You are tempted to boast – to parade this thing, to show it off.

See the rich paradox here: here is the cross, this shameful, disgraceful thing, but to Paul it is only boasting point. He boasts in the cross; he parades the cross; he shows off the cross.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 *And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*

I think Alexamenos' graffiti tells you how central the cross was. Christians did not merely accept the message that their Lord and Saviour had been crucified, they boasted in it. For someone to draw that picture, mocking Jesus, it tells you what they told others about their faith. They didn't hide the cross; they didn't try to escape the shame, they preached it.

Now, with all that in mind, ask yourself, how much did the Christians want the world's approval? How much did they want the world's admiration? How much did they want the world's acceptance? How much did they want the world's respect? How much did they want the world's recognition? How much did they want the world's friendship?

In that culture, for you to embrace the cross and to preach the cross not only meant you were being saved from sin, but that you were being separated from the world. You were embracing something that would make you an idiot and a scandal in the eyes of society.

¹⁴ But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

They had completely changed sides. They knew that to accept Christ on the cross as their forgiveness was to change sides. Now the world's scorning and mocking would no longer cause shame, but praise to God. Now the world's calling them fools and idiots would mean they were wise in the sight of God. Now the world's thinking them weak would mean they were on the side of God's power. The early church knew that to accept the word of the cross was to be called out of the world and to embrace a new life which the world will not and cannot understand.

Now something has happened since then. The cross has become an emblem, a decoration. It has lost its cultural ugliness and horror and scandal and shame. People don't react to the word cross in the same way, because it is no longer an instrument of torture and death.

But the message of the cross hasn't lost its scandal. The message is still scandalous: that a sinner deserves death and punishment before a holy God. That is highly offensive to people today. It is highly offensive to modern man that he is on death-row as far as God is concerned; that he is not naturally good and worthy of heaven, that he has offended God in ways he cannot possibly conceive of. That's offensive to the world. It's uncultured, uncivilised and simple-minded.

That God became a man, is offensive to the world. After all, God is our cosmic consciousness, God is the life-force in us all, God is the energy of the universe, God is all of our creative acts. How can you make God into a person, much less three persons, one of whom became a man. That's preposterous! That's fairy tales! That's barbaric!

That Jesus was the substitute for the sinner, is offensive to the world. How could Jesus be punished for guilty sinners? One unbeliever called this truth 'cosmic child abuse'. It is crazy – that Jesus could pay for Adam's sin. That He alone is the way is highly offensive to people today. How could one man's death at one time in one place be the key for all men everywhere? How could Jesus Christ be the only way when there are so many religions and so many people, and so many religious ideas of sin the world? It is so narrow-minded and bigoted and backward to imagine that Jesus is the only way! And to say that those who do not believe in Jesus will experience the wrath of God is like uttering the vilest curse words to some people. It is almost savage to say such things. That it is faith in Him plus nothing that saves is offensive to people today. The idea that I do not contribute to my salvation, that I do not have enough merit to earn my own salvation is very offensive. That is still scandalous, and still ridiculous to people. That is a message which the world thinks you should be embarrassed to believe and embarrassed to share. But that is the word of the cross. That is the gospel.

So what are you going to do? Well, you have two choices. You can make the world's glory your boast, in which case Christ becomes your shame.

Or, you can make Christ's shameful death your boast, and glory in telling the world that:

Hebrews 13:10-15 *We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. ¹² Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. ¹³ Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. ¹⁴ For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. ¹⁵ Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.*

Hebrews is all about believers not turning back to unbelief. And the writer of Hebrews says to his readers – those animals who were sacrificed to make atonement had their bodies disposed of outside the camp. That was the place for refuse, for rubbish, for waste, for anyone impure, defiled and shameful.

So Jesus, the fulfilment of all the sacrifices was crucified outside the city. Figuratively it means this: the death of Jesus was a shameful, reproachful, scandalous thing. Like carcasses were chucked out by O.T. Israel, so Jesus was disposed of by the world, written off as refuse, shameful, disgraceful.

Verse 13 tells us what our response should be:

Let us go to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. Why? We have no continuing city here. This world is no longer our home. It is not where we seek our joy and boast and satisfaction. So, let us go to Jesus, and embrace the shame of the cross, the shame of the gospel message and wear it proudly.

The same cross that saved you from sin, has separated you from the world. The cross does not only take away your punishment, it puts your lust for worldly approval to death. You die there. You desire to be recognised, approved, admired, lauded, praised, liked, accepted and received by the world dies when you embrace the cross.

You see, you cannot use the cross like a buffet, and pick out what you want. You cannot choose the part of the cross that forgives you of your sins, but then reject the part of the cross that is a scandal to the world. It's one thing. That's why Paul keeps telling us, he is anything but ashamed.

Romans 1:16 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.*

2 Timothy 1:12 *For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. Has the shame of the cross become your glory?*

Philippians 1:20-21 *according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

That is a man who has made up his mind which world he wants to live in, and whose reputation he wants to defend. He has decided whose praise he wants to gain, and whose acceptance he wishes to obtain. He has died to his own reputation in the eyes of the world. He has died to worldly accolades, praise, and acceptance. He cares only about Christ's name and glory and praise. He wants Christ to be magnified. He wants to experience Christ working through him.

And that's the secret. You turn the thing on its head. The shame becomes your glory. Your former glory becomes a shame to you. To embrace the cross is to turn the whole thing upside down and inside out.

Jesus and shall it ever be,
A mortal man, ashamed of Thee?
Ashamed of Thee, whom angels praise,
Whose glories shine through endless days?

Ashamed of Jesus! that dear Friend
On Whom my hopes of Heav'n depend!
No; when I blush, be this my shame,
That I no more revere His Name.

Ashamed of Jesus! empty pride!
I'll boast a Savior crucified,
And O may this my portion be,
My Savior not ashamed of me!

I wonder if Alexamenos saw the inscription. Probably he did. And probably he rejoiced in the scandal, in the foolishness, and wore it like a badge.

What is your glory today? Is the shame of the gospel your glory? Do you boast in the things the world expects you to be embarrassed about? Or do you give in and seek their acceptance.

It is no accident that Jesus said these things together:

Mark 8:34-38 *When He had called the people to Himself, with His disciples also, He said to them, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ³⁵ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? ³⁷ "Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."*