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32As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

33And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink.

35And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there.

I listened to a man from South Africa preach this week. Through the magic of computers and MP3 files and CD burners. I had a large machine work project at work. Lathes and mills, and time alone. So I go to the computer and from a banquet feast of endless possibilities of better preaching than I will ever be able to do, I chose to listen to Conrad Mbewe.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/christ-and-him-crucified>

Since I can't say his last name right, I'll just say Conrad. He tells of going on holiday, and from place to place he joins different congregations and listens, and he says, all across the land, what he hears is men telling stories of their own triumphs. Hero stories and the preacher . . . is the subject of his own story. The preacher is the hero.

The point of these sermons is to make you go away saying, I've finally

found someone who's feet don't touch the ground like everyone else. This fellow is bigger than life.

And yet, that's not what we find in the Bible. Paul, tells the Corinthian Christians: *For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.*

Paul only had one story to tell. And it wasn't about him, it was about Jesus, who stopped him on the road to Damascus one day, and saved him from himself.

Paul is a good study. Everywhere he went, he sought out his own Jewish brethren, got an audience in their synagogues and immediately presented Christ crucified.

He would take them to their own Old Testament scriptures, which were THE scriptures at the time, and he would make just one case. Christ crucified.

In Athens, the center of gentiles, he makes his longest recorded introduction. Bear with me for a few moments while I read from Acts 17. See how long it takes Paul to lay some groundwork with a people who had no scriptures or background with God, before he gets to his constant topic;

22 So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23 "For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. 24 "The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25 nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

28 for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29 "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30 "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

32 Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this."

It takes Paul seven sentences to get to the resurrection. And that was the exception, not the rule. With the greeks he had to lay some basic groundwork, but still, it only takes him seconds to get to Christ and Him crucified. That's his message.

Peter and John were the same. Get to the point. Quickly and single focusedly. Listen to Peter's first sermon; Acts 2:22 *"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 "But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.*

The christian religion is different from all other religions because it is a relationship more than a religion. It is a personal one on one relationship with the living God.

But the possibility of that relationship has everything to do with the removal of sin. God cannot and will not have a relationship with sinful people.

*Isa. 59:1 Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short
That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull
That it cannot hear.*

2But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.

A relationship with the living God is only possible when sin is removed, and sin was removed at the cross. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* 2Cor. 5:21

Matthew has been telling us the story of this Man, Jesus of Nazareth, for 27 chapters in order to get us to this event. Christ crucified.

It is the central event of all history, past, present and future. Everything since sin entered and broke man's relationship with God in Genesis 3, has been going here.

Everything else is secondary information. Events leading up to, and events looking back at this central event. This is where sin is eradicated. This is where Satan is defeated. This is where Jesus, who has the authority to reign and rule on this earth, makes it possible for those who love Him to join Him in that victory.

This is Jesus, who has legions and legions of angels at His command to do His bidding, if He wants them to. Jesus, the Son of God, who spoke these worlds into being. What a remarkable scene unfolds, then;

27Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. 28They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

In our modern world with rules of engagement agreed upon by most nations of civilized men, such as The Geneva Conventions and the Hague Conventions, we have had many discussions and still are having discussions about how far do we go. What are the limits to dignity that

civilized men do not cross over?

There were big stories and a national embarrassment just a few years back about abuses of people who our country held in prisons in Iraq. The perpetrators were punished. It was headline news in the United States. We don't go beyond certain lines that have to do with basic human dignity.

Those are good discussions and good rules. Other wise we are lowered to the levels we read about in disgust. ISIS seems to glory in crossing every possible line of human dignity. It's important for us to not engage at the same levels that they engage. Civilization hangs in that balance.

Compare that to this day. Jesus is taken into the praetorium. This would be a large room for assemblies that were connected to the Roman governor, Pilate.

So the Roman cohort, the troops as it were, take Jesus into this room and they surround Him, and they proceed to mock Him in a way that is designed to remove every shred of His dignity.

They strip His garments from Him, and place a scarlet robe on Him. They weave a crown for him made of a thorny bush. Picture taking some cuttings from your rose bush stalks and weaving them together into a circular size, then pounding those onto someone's head.

Then they give him a staff. Probably about the size of a large flag standard. A king's staff. And then the mocking begins. The blood streams down his head and face from the thorns. Scarlet blood and scarlet robe.

and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

These Romans, for the most part, hate the jews. In their minds, this is not just a humiliation of one powerless man, it is symbolic of God's chosen people. The jews. The jews are ridiculous. This is their King. A fitting ridiculous king for a ridiculous powerless people. Hail, King

of the Jews!

What they do not understand is the irony of their action. Jesus is not only King of the Jews, He has authority to reign over everything. Satan who has usurped that authority will be deposed and Jesus will reign supreme. Evil will be vanquished. The entire world will be His and evil will be removed. Judged. Punished. Gone.

He could have done that this day, but it would have been Him alone. It pleased God in His eternal design, to make a way for men to reign with Him, and for that to happen, an avenue for the removal of sin must be made, and that requires this punishment of the perfect Son of God, in our place.

He takes our sin. We take His righteousness. A righteousness not our own, but His righteousness, given to those who will repent and believe.

30They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head.

Degradation seems to multiply itself. Once people start down that road, it has to escalate. The mocking scene with the blood and the crown and the robe is no longer satisfying their appetite for degradation.

Now they spit on the person who has in His power, their next breath. The blood streaming down no longer satisfies. Now they take the flagpole, the standard, and begin to beat his head with it. Like taking whacks with a baseball bat.

No wonder that Isaiah, 750 years before the event, says this; 52:14 *Just as many were astonished at you, My people, So His appearance was marred more than any man And His form more than the sons of men.*

He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted

with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Isaiah 50:6 I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked ...

This is the punishment and indignity that we were due. Isaiah says; *But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,* This was our punishment, born by Him.

31After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

Have you ever thought about Barabbas. Radical terrorist with his two buddies. They were the scheduled event for that day. Barabbas should have been nailed to the very cross Jesus now carries. It should have been the 2 thieves, and Barabbas in the middle.

What a turn of events. Barabbas is free, Jesus is carrying the cross.

We never hear of Barabbas again. We can only assume he lives out his years, does what he does, and then dies. Never-the-less, there is a picture here.

We are Barabbas. He was a rebel. We are rebellious to God. Born in sin. Dead to God. Living in rebellion. Then one morning, suddenly, the cross that we should have been on, would have been on, is being carried away by someone else. We're set free.

Somehow, because of actions out of our control, we are free, He's carrying our cross, taking our punishment. He dies that day, we get a reprieve.

That's as far as we can take that parallel. We have no further information about Barabbas. He reaped the benefit of physical life that day. But that was as far as it goes, unless somehow, he believes in this man, Jesus.

Because Jesus died on that cross, that day, instead of Barabbas, a path for forgiveness of rebellion against God is opened for Barabbas and everyone else. A substitutionary death. Payment for our sins.

32As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

This little note tells us that Jesus has reached the limits of His human flesh. Nights without sleep, petitioning His father, great drops of sweat like blood, arrest, trial, degradation, flogging, beatings, all of it has pushed the limits of his humanness and His body is breaking down.

The romans grab someone looking on and press him into this service. Cyrene was a city in North Africa. Libya. And it had a large population of jews. There are lots of church traditions about this Simon and his sons, but nothing provable. Nice to hope that this rude introduction to the suffering Saviour produced belief.

33And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink.

Listen to Psalm 69 describe these events perhaps a thousand and 50 years before they happened;

*19You know my reproach and my shame and my dishonor;
All my adversaries are before You.*

*20Reproach has broken my heart and I am so sick.
And I looked for sympathy, but there was none,
And for comforters, but I found none.*

*21They also gave me gall for my food
And for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*

The Holy Spirit inspires the prophets to write a first person account of the torments that our Lord was enduring.

I was in Israel in 1971. Outside the gates of the old wall there is a parking lot and shop area for municipal busses. Beyond the parking lot, cliff areas rise up. And in the natural formation of the cliffs, you can clearly see a shape that looks like a human skull.

It brings this story to life to think that underneath where the busses park today, outside the gates, at the base of those cliffs, may be this place where three crosses stood. You can go to google images and type in "Jerusalem, place of a skull" and get the same image that I saw myself 41 years ago.

35 And when they had crucified Him,

Crucifixion is an unimaginable death that my generation only learned about in books and tried to imagine the horrors of it. Begun by the persians and macedonians and perfected by the Romans.

It was a capitol punishment not practiced by jews. Jews were instructed to stone, strangle, or burn a capitol punishment victim. Crucifixion was foreign to them until Rome occupied Israel.

Josephus the jewish historian speaks of thousands of crucifixion deaths though when Israel rebelled against Rome.

And now with the barbarity of radical Islam, crucifixion is back. It seems like a race towards barbarism. Shock value. And a slap at christians, who they fiercely hate

35 And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there.

Over 1,000 years before this event, 3,000 plus years from where we sit today, listen to the Psalmist describe these events from a first person context. These are random verses from Psalm 22;

1 My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning.

*2O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;
And by night, but I have no rest.*

*3Yet You are holy,
O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.*

*4In You our fathers trusted;
They trusted and You delivered them.*

*5To You they cried out and were delivered;
In You they trusted and were not disappointed.*

*6But I am a worm and not a man,
A reproach of men and despised by the people.*

*7All who see me sneer at me;
They separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying,*

*8“Commit yourself to the LORD; let Him deliver him;
Let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.”*

*9Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb;
You made me trust when upon my mother’s breasts.*

*10Upon You I was cast from birth;
You have been my God from my mother’s womb.*

*11Be not far from me, for trouble is near;
For there is none to help.*

*12Many bulls have surrounded me;
Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.*

*13They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.*

*14I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It is melted within me.*

*15My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws;
And You lay me in the dust of death.*

*16For dogs have surrounded me;
A band of evildoers has encompassed me;
They pierced my hands and my feet.*

*17I can count all my bones.
They look, they stare at me;*

*18They divide my garments among them,
And for my clothing they cast lots.*

It should be chilling to us, 2000 years later, to read a first person account of this person, Jesus, on the cross, looking down on those who are committing His murder.

They pierced my hands and my feet. For a thousand years that would have been a curiosity to the jews, who stoned or stangled or burned with fire those who were worthy of capitol punishment. *They pierced my hands and my feet.* What does this obscure text mean? Why is it there? Who is it talking about? Why were his hands and feet pierced? Very obscure.

Then the Romans came, a thousand years later, and these words describe the method of death of the person who is speaking first person.

You do the math and tell me the odds of someone describing an event in great detail, first person, a thousand years before it happens. There are far too many details here for this to be circumstantial.

12Many bulls have surrounded me;

*Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled me.
13They open wide their mouth at me,
As a ravening and a roaring lion.*

I have some personal convictions here. The symbols attached to Satan throughout the centuries are bull like. The golden calf that the Israelites worshipped. Things that I don't want to know any more about than just these symbolic ideas.

Does the author of the Psalm here cross over into worlds that our eyes cannot see. Is this the unseen spiritual world of evil beings surrounding the cross, mouths open to devour?

Revelation chapter 12 has a similar picture:

1A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.

3Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. 4And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.

5And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.

I think we'll end our thoughts just here this morning and pick it up in vs. 37 next week.

This multifaceted picture. A crucifixion of the sinless son of God. Satan and his angels (demons) encircling the cross. Waiting to devour this son. Thinking the victory is theirs.

But look again in vs. 5 of Revelation 12. *And her child was caught up to God and to His throne.* This Jesus who Satan thinks he will devour in death, will rise up from the dead victorious. He will ascend back to His Father in heaven and sit on His throne. He is there today.

The cross has become a symbol. Radical Islam hates it. It makes them crazy enough to murder 6 people who are in a vehicle with a red cross on the exterior. Our politicians have it covered up in their news feeds so it won't be a distraction.

As we drive in large cities we see buildings with crosses prominent in front of them. Our daughters and wives wear them around their necks. We sing about the cross regularly in this church.

Why? Why all the fuss over a roman death symbol?

I believe the answers are larger than what our eyes can see. I've already hinted at the enormous struggle between good and evil. Satan and God, fighting over this rock we call earth. Satan doing his best to hold onto his rule over this place. His rule over men.

The good news of the cross is that Satan's hold over men through sin which they are born into, is forever broken. The cross is his defeat. The cross is the hope of sinful men of a righteousness, not their own, but imputed unto them because of the death of the one perfect man on that cross.

Take a look around you today at this world. The hatred of the cross is getting ever stronger. Satan's time is short. Evil men are duped, many, without a clue, into believing the cross is a symbol of non-freedom. That's because they love sin. They love serving an evil master. They don't want to acknowledge a God who has righteous standards He will judge by.

These ideas are accentuated by our current world, but they're nothing new. We'll close with a reminder written to us by our brother Paul 2000 years ago.

17For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with eloquent words of wisdom, lest the cross of the Christ be emptied of its power. 18For 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.

19For it is written,

*“I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET
ASIDE.”*

20Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For those of us who believe, the cross is that symbol in which we put our confidence that we will be able to stand before our Creator God with a righteousness, not our own, but one imputed to us. The very righteousness of the man who died on that cross 2000 years ago, so that we could be freed from the ravages of sin to live eternally with the Father and with Him.

To us that cross is a symbol of freedom and joy unspeakable.