

GOOD FRIDAY: THE GOSPEL OF GOD CRUCIFIED

No where is the uniqueness of the Christian message seen more clearly than in the cross. No other religion, philosophy, or worldview is centered around the death of God the way gospel is. Christians affirm that the deepest reality in the universe is the sacrificial love of God. As the early Christians reflected on the meaning of the death of Christ, the Spirit gave them an amazing discovery. The identity and mission of Jesus turned out to be a huge surprise. For one thing, Jesus failed to fit the Messianic profile that most Jews had in mind. They had hoped for a “Jewish Caesar,” of sorts, who would strong arm the pagan Gentiles into submission and put the nation of Israel in her rightful place. A crucified Messiah was no Messiah at all. Indeed, the recent history of Judaism had been littered with failed would-be Messiahs who ended up getting crucified or otherwise defeated by the Romans. Thus, it was a surprise to discover that Jesus really *had* fulfilled all the Messianic purposes of God. He was the new and true Davidic King. He had passed through death – and come out the other side into resurrection glory. He was triumphant, but not in the

way the Jews had anticipated. Instead of pummeling Israel's enemies into line, he suffered and served his way to victory.

But more than that, the Christians came to the realization that Jesus was God in human form. He was the eternal Word made flesh. He was the Creator incarnate. This was the most astounding and astonishing revelation of all. After the resurrection, the apostles began to proclaim that the man who had lived and ministered among them, who their eyes had seen and their hands had touched, was the not only an ordinary man but also Israel's Lord. His every action was both perfectly human and perfectly divine. Jesus manifested humanity as it really ought to be, mature, faithful, and fully devoted to God's service. But he also showed forth true Godhood. The gospel writers make this clear. Essentially they say, "If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is the glory of God on display." But, again, the gospel confronts us with a paradox: While Jesus reveals the fullness of the divine life, he does so through turning all worldly values and expectations on their heads. He shows us a God who is humble, who assumes the posture of a servant.

This is why Paul said the gospel is a stumbling stone of offense to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. The Jews stumbled when they were confronted with the proclamation of the gospel. How could Israel's Messiah be nailed to a cross? More than that, how could Israel's God end up on a cross? For the philosophically oriented pagans, the gospel of God crucified appeared to be sheer madness. (See the picture on the facing page for an example.) How could the supposed King of the cosmos stoop to serve? Lesslie Newbigin captures the situation well: "In a world which longed for personal salvation, and which was full of gods and lords claiming to meet that need, how utterly absurd and indeed revolting to claim that a Jew from a notoriously troublesome province of the Empire who has been condemned as a blasphemer and executed as a traitor was the Saviour of the world! How on earth could anyone believe that?"

There were many in the early days of the church who said that Jesus could not have been God. The argument usually came down to the cross: How could God suffer? How could the immortal one die? How could the cross possibly tell us anything about who God is? The orthodox were very forthright. The cross belonged within the story of God. The cross had to be included in the identity of God. This became the orthodox position. The Nicene Creed and Apostles Creed bear this out. They attribute suffering under Pontius Pilate and dying on the cross to the one who is and is very God of very God. The God-man was crucified for us.

That God has suffered in the man Jesus is a truth full of mystery. We cannot explain it or theorize about it. But it is a truth with numerous critical implications. Contemplate two of them: [1] Consider the magnitude of your sin. Only the death of God could bear the load of the curse and undo humanity's rebellion. No mere creature could achieve our redemption. As we sometimes sing: "Amazing Love, how can it be, that thou my God shouldst die for me?" [2] Consider God's nearness to you when you suffer. If you suffer – through the loss of a loved one, a traumatic injury or illness, or a major disappointment in life – God has "been there and done that." The Son knows what it's like to suffer to the uttermost, to be despised and rejected of men, to face the pains of death. The Father knows what it's like to lose a Child. The gospel invites us to locate our suffering within the cross. It comforts us with the thought that God is with us in our pain, and is committed to setting the world right once again. Herman Melville said (with typical cynicism), "The reason men fear God and distrust his heart is that they fancy him all brain, like a watch." But God is not all brain – the cross shows us his heart.

The sermon by Peter Leithart, below, gives further insight into the meaning of Good Friday and the gospel.

A Good Friday sermon, by Peter J. Leithart, delivered at a joint Trinity-Christ Church Good Friday Service, April 9 2004.

“We speak God’s wisdom among you in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age had understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Corinthians 2:8-9)

Who died on the cross on the first Good Friday? All the Christological heresies of the early church arose from false answers to that question. Arius contemplated the man writhing and bleeding and crying out and suffocating on the Roman cross, and asked, Can this be the Creator of heaven and earth? Nestorians were more offended by the idea that God could be born as a baby, but they too raised questions about the cross: Surely, they said, only the human nature of Jesus was born of Mary; only the human nature of Jesus suffered and died. Like the rulers of this age, the church herself has often had difficulty believing that the one crucified was the “Lord of glory.”

Incredibly, through the guidance of the Spirit, the church endured all the attacks of the heretics and clung to the offense of the cross. Offensive as it was to all reason and apparent wisdom, impossible as it sounded, the church confessed that the Romans had crucified the Lord of glory. They confessed faith in “Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” The Nicene confession was even more emphatic: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate for us by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried.”

Throughout these long sentences, there is only one subject: “Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son our Lord.” There is no shift from what “God the Son” did to what “Jesus the man” did. Everything that happened to Jesus happened to the Incarnate Son of God; and everything that Jesus did God the Son did. These creedal statements have guided the church’s reading of the gospels. We are not, the early fathers argued, to go through the gospels dividing Jesus’ story into the “God parts” and the “man parts.” The one Person of the incarnate Son was baptized by John in the Jordan, and fasted forty days in the wilderness; the Lord of glory healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead; the Lord of glory ate at the same table with tax gatherers and sinners, and touched lepers; the Lord of glory rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and cast out the moneychangers from the temple; the Lord of glory broke bread with His disciples in the upper room, and agonized in prayer in Gethsemane; the Lord of glory was arrested and beaten, and put on trial. It was the same Lord of glory who hung on the cross.

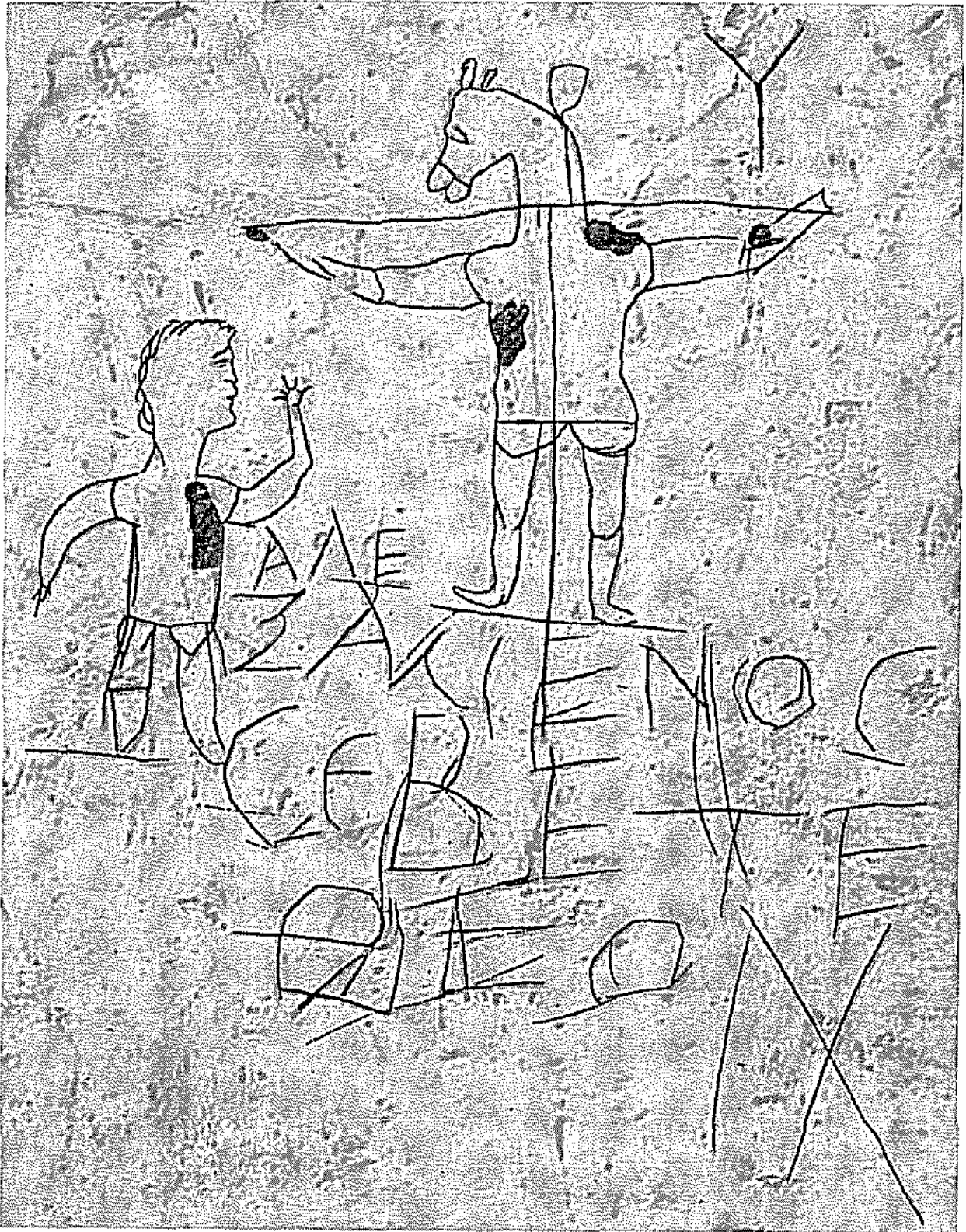
We often think that Jesus’ death on the cross somehow weakens His sovereignty. God the Son is, with the Father and Spirit, the sovereign Lord, Creator and ruler of all things; He can do all that He pleases, and everything is in His hand. But, we think, in spite of that, He is also the One who was weak, suffered and died. The death of the Son of God somehow contradicts His Lordship.

Paul knew no such tension: in one breath he is talking about predestination and in the next he is talking about the cross; the rulers of this age crucified the Lord of glory. Nor did the Nicene Fathers see any contradiction: in the same sentence, they affirmed that the Son was Creator of all things visible and invisible and also that the Son died on the cross.

Jesus' death does not cancel or contradict His sovereignty. It is a revelation of that sovereignty. Jesus' life and death reveals that God is Lord not only over all things; He is Lord in all things. He is not only Lord over the safe confines of heaven, but Lord in the rough and tumble of Roman and Jewish politics; not only Lord over galaxies, but Lord in the world of hunger and thirst; not only the Lord over nations, but the Lord in suffering, injustice, and pain; not only the Lord over life, but also the Lord and tamer in death. No human experience is closed to God; we cannot put a sign outside any area of human life that says "God has no business here, God may not enter." We may try to set up obstacles and roadblocks, but the Lord bursts in regardless.

The cross is not a contradiction of God's Lordship, but its most dramatic expression and revelation. He is the Lord even in the place that is most opposed to Him, and He exercises this Lordship for us. He is the Lord of light in the midst of darkness, accepting our darkness so that He can transform our nighttime into day; He is Lord of laughter in the midst of tears, crying out in agony so that He could change our mourning into dancing; He is the Lord of glory in the depths of His shame, submitting to shame so that we can be transfigured from glory to glory; He is Lord of life even in death, absorbing the death that is due to us so that death will have no dominion over us.

"They crucified the Lord of glory." This has often been an offense and a scandal. Paul exhorts us instead to make it a boast: Let him who boasts, boast in this Lord, the Lord of glory, the crucified Lord of glory.



Roman Graffiti: Ass on a Cross

(Archaeologists found this drawing on a wall, dating from the ancient Roman Empire, intending to mock the gospel. The scribbled caption says "Alexamenos worships God." It is obviously intended as sarcasm, poking fun at a new convert. It points to the utter folly of worshipping a crucified God, in the minds of the Greco-Romans. Jesus is depicted as hanging on the cross with the head of an ass.)