

The Scandalous Offense of the Cross, Part 1

Luke 9:23

The Scandalous Offense of the Cross.” That’s what we’re going to see and hear from the text, Luke 9:23. “And Jesus said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.’” We’ve come to a significant turning point in the earthly life and ministry of our Lord. Jesus has taken his disciples away from the region of Galilee. They’d been preaching in that whole area of Galilee for about a year and a half, and Jesus has been taking them north out of Galilee, walking from Bethsaida toward Caesarea Philippi. And along the way, Jesus has elicited from his disciples a confession of faith, a confession that portrays and displays their understanding, which is this understanding, they know the truth about his identity.

Jesus is not just another prophet. He is the Messiah; he is the Christ of God. Contrary to what we might expect, instead of encouraging the disciples to go out and broadcast this exciting news, he silences them. He doesn’t want anyone to rush off just

yet with the wrong expectations about who Messiah is and what Messiah came to do. He doesn't want anybody to hurry to enthrone him as king. They need to understand more. Even his own disciples, they need to understand exactly what, Jesus equals the Christ of God, they need to know what means. So he told them what that means, Luke 9:22, "The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Before any glory, there's going to be suffering.

Today we're going to see, if he's going to be rejected and killed, so must you. If you, too, would follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The rejection of the world because of the shame of the cross, that is in your future as well and that's Luke 9:23, "He said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me.'" That, folks, is what really means to be a Christian. And unlike the people of the first century, those who first heard Jesus say those words, you're not scandalized by the mere uttering of those words. One word in particular, the word, cross. That word was a stigma. That word was an offense.

If time travel were possible, and we brought someone from the first century, maybe plucked them right out this crowd, and

we bring them to our century for a visit to the twenty-first century, I think they would be, after getting over the shock, absolutely, should I say, appalled? I think they'd be absolutely horrified at the barbarity and vulgarity of our religious observance: a cross symbol. A cross symbol hanging in a public space, a public meeting place. Women wearing crosses on pieces of jewelry around their neck and from their ears, dangling from bracelets. Children running around with crosses on their Bibles, drawing pictures of crosses in Sunday school.

Beloved, that's, that's death imagery and it's not just death, but it's the most brutal, terrible, horrifying death imaginable. It was death by cruelty, by, by torture. That was a symbol of sadism. In fact, when Jesus told the gathered crowd that following him meant taking up a cross, it wouldn't be hard to imagine an audible gasp coming out of the crowd that day. The word cross was an absolutely shocking word, a word that was to them crude and vulgar. You didn't talk about it in polite company. Only the dregs of society uttered it, more like a taunt for them. It was something you didn't say in public. It was something you didn't say in mixed company. It wasn't, certainly wasn't something that was spoken by any respectable teacher.

So beloved, before we could talk about the meaning of Luke 9:23, I think we need to recover the sense of this text, which means that we need to understand the scandalous offense of the cross. That's how we're going to use the time that we have together today, to recover the scandal and the offense of the cross, so that you, beloved, can make a decision, so that you can ask and answer the most important question of your life: Do I really want to be here? Do I really want to follow the way of the cross? Because let me just tell you a preview, beloved: The cross means the end of you. It means the end of you. The end of me.

Let's begin with a question, first point for today, a question: What picture does the cross portray? What picture does the cross portray? Here in Luke 9:23, this is the first mention of the word cross in Luke's Gospel. It's the first time we've read it, and for us, as I said, the word doesn't immediately bring to mind what it did for the first-century audience. For them, the cross was a form of capital punishment. But it wasn't a form of capital punishment like the guillotine or the firing squad, where it was over quickly.

For them, the mention of the cross evoked images, yes, of criminals dying, but barbaric cruelty, of violent suppression of

Rome, mass executions, an unbridled sadism. That's what the cross brought to their minds. And we are very far removed from how horrible crucifixion really was. But as familiar as the ancient world was with the practice of crucifixion, you need to understand that they, too, they, too, who saw it, they found it horrifying, and barbaric, and cruel. For people in the ancient world, as one author put it, quote, "The cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death. It was an utterly offensive affair, obscene in the original sense of the word."

It was Cicero who said, he died in about 43 B.C. He said, "Let the very name of the cross be far away, not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears." If they found it so terrible, why did they practice it? Because they believed that there were some people who deserved such indignity, there were some crimes that merited and warranted the cruelty of crucifixion. So they wanted to send a message to the rest of society: This is what that crime, this is what that kind of a person deserves.

The practice of capital punishment by crucifixion is ancient; it goes way, way back. The Assyrians, they used to, in their wars and campaigns and brutality, they used to suppress

any kind of thought of rebellion through fear by impaling their victims on poles or cutting off heads and stacking them at the city gates. Gruesome, I know! Over time, though, it was crucifixion that came to be the preferred method of making an example out of those who resisted, and it was the very worst of criminals, the very worst of crimes.

There's a man named Martin Hengel, wrote a book called, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, a very good book. I don't agree with all of his thinking and his theology, but he does go into great detail and is helpful on the issue of crucifixion. There may have been, in according to what he's written there, more expedient, maybe less troublesome ways, less labor-intensive ways of executing a criminal in their day. But for some criminals, for some crimes, they felt that the trouble was worth it. Crucifixion was about sending a message. It was about making a point. It was a matter, writes Hengel, of "subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity."

Antiochus Epiphanes, capturing Jerusalem in 167 B.C., according to Josephus, "He punished the best and the noblest of Jerusalem's men, who refused to bow the knee." Josephus says, "They were whipped with rods. Their bodies were torn to pieces,

were crucified while they were still alive and breathed. They also strangled those women their sons whom they'd circumcised, as the king had appointed, hanging their sons about their necks as they were upon the crosses." End quote.

If you're feeling uncomfortable, I understand. I am, too. But you need to understand that this is what the people heard as they listened to Jesus speak and use that one word: cross. They felt as uncomfortable as you do now, as I do in even saying this publicly. The cross was, as one author wrote, "a repugnant instrument of cruelty, pain, de-humanization, and shame." You might think that the Jews, having suffered this over and over by the Romans, by the Greeks, you might think they'd never stoop to use the same form of execution. Ah, but they did. The Hasmonean king, Alexander Jannaeus, at the conclusion of the Judean civil war, he took the surviving rebels, rebels back to Jerusalem, many of them Galileans, by the way, and to make a public example, he executed 800 of them, most of them Pharisees, and he executed them by crucifixion.

But it really was the Romans who perfected the art of execution by crucifixion. They found it especially useful to make a public example of those who resisted Roman will, who defied Roman law. James Edwards wrote, quote, "The cross was the

most visible and omnipresent aspect of Rome's terror apparatus, designed especially to punish criminals and quash slave rebellions in the most painful, protracted, and public manner possible as a warning against rebellion. In 71 B.C. the Roman general Crassus defeated the slave rebel Spartacus and crucified him and 6,000 of his followers on the Appian Way between Rome and Capua. A century later, Nero crucified, burned the Christians who were falsely accused of setting fire to Rome. There are no known survivors of Roman crucifixions. The cross was thus a symbol of absoluteness and totality." End Quote.

I want you to think about that, especially in light of Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Listen, once you set out on that road, you are not coming back. There's no escape hatch. There's no detour. Hengel, in his book, describes the cru, cruelty of crucifixion this way, it's a number of different quotes, I've kind of pieced together here.

"Crucifixion included a flogging beforehand, and the victim often carried the beam to the place of execution, where he was nailed to it with outstretched arms, raised up, and seated on a small wooden peg. The form of execution could vary considerably. Crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full reign. It was the rule in Roman

times to nail the victim by both hands and feet, and the flogging which was a stereotype part of the punishment would make the blood flow in streams.” End quote.

There are even more gruesome descriptions, believe it or not, of this, but I’m going to spare you the worst of it. That’s enough, that is enough to help us understand how utterly abhorrent the word cross was to that first-century audience. And what you need to know, as we consider this text in front of us, Luke 9:23, is that the image of condemned criminals, carrying the patibulum, the, the crossbeam of his cross, called the patibulum, to the place of execution. You need to understand that that was not an uncommon image in Jesus’ day. It was common enough. Children watched as criminals passed by, driven along by Roman soldiers. They watched them marching as if in a train, shuffling along, each one carrying his patibulum on his shoulders, exhausted, and beaten, and flogged, shuffling, heading to the place of their own execution.

And so the question we asked at the beginning, What, what, what picture does the cross portray, here? Well, it’s a dreadful one. It’s one from which we naturally recoil in horror, wanting to look away, feeling a sense of fear. Jesus, here, in Luke 9:23, he wants us to picture a scene. He wants us to picture in

our mind's eye and imagine a train of criminals carrying their own crosses, proceeding toward the place of their own execution, and at the head of the train is none other than Jesus, the innocent one.

According to verse 22, he was rejected by the greatest legal minds in the world, the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin. He was delivered over by them to the dreadful power of Rome to be crucified. Jesus was judged a criminal, and he was sentenced to death by the world, the greatest and the best of the world, the rich and the famous, the people that you and I look around and everyone is aspiring to be like them. Jesus was condemned, rejected, condemned to death by them. You still admire them? It was absolutely, for the Jewish and Roman's auth, Roman authorities, it was absolutely ludicrous to them why we would want to follow this condemned and crucified God.

Augustine recorded in complaint of a man who was trying to dissuade his wife from becoming a Christian, and in the exasperation, the advice that he got from another atheist, another, another pagan really, in exasperation he said, "Let her continue as she pleases, persisting in her vain delusions and lamenting in song a god who died in delusions, who was condemned by judges whose verdict was just, and executed in the prime of

life by the worst of deaths; a death bound with iron.” End quote. That reference, there, to a death bound with iron, refers to the nails that fastened Jesus’ hands and feet to the cross.

Listen, for the world, there is no honor, there is nothing commendable about following after Jesus and that, folks, is exactly what Jesus wants us to picture, here. He’s heading to the cross. He’s heading there a condemned criminal, verse 22, and following behind him is a train of disciples in verse 23, and they’re all carrying their own crosses. The Cross is the very symbol of what led Jesus to his sentence of rejection and death. It’s our symbol of rejection as well.

Each disciple places his foot carefully in the footprint of his Lord, who has gone ahead of him, the one who went before him to the place of execution, to Golgotha, to the Place of the Skull. That’s where we’re going. Beloved, that’s what Jesus is portraying for us. This is what he’s calling us to do. Again, I ask, knowing what we know, do you want that? Do you want that? It’s a very real question. I’m not just being rhetorical, here.

So we ask a second question in a short outline, here, two points. Knowing what we do know now, why would anyone, why would anyone follow the way of the cross? Why would anyone follow this way? If it means the end of self, if it means my reputation

doesn't go up but goes down, means my, my income might reduce, means I might not get opportunities, it means that people around me scorn me, reject me, hate me, because I follow a condemned criminal as my God, why would anyone want to follow the way of the cross?

Look at the verse again, Luke 9:23, "He said to them all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, follow me.'" Amazingly, this is Jesus' call to discipleship. This is Jesus, here, being evangelistic. This his A-game of evangelism. He's out preaching on the streets, and what does he say? Here's what it means to follow me. When we really understand the word of the cross, we need to see that most of the people who listened to him found this word of the cross offensive and entirely unacceptable.

As we read earlier from Paul, "The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." It's *mória*. *Mória*, utterly moronic, foolish, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." What's the difference between us and them? They look at the cross and see abhorrent shame, and indignity and profanity, even. We look at the cross and see Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Martin Hengel cites Melito's homily on the Passion, where the crucifixion, one that's scorned by the world is pondered as a wonderful mystery by believers who follow him. Here's the quote. I have some exceptions with a little bit of the expression, here, but it is rhetorical and beautiful. But listen to this, "He who hung the earth in its place hangs there. He who fixed the heavens is fixed there. He who made all things fast is made fast upon the tree. The master has been insulted. God has been murdered. The King of Israel has been slain by an Israelitish hand. O, strange murder, strange crime! The Master has been treated in an unseemly fashion, his body naked and not even deemed worthy of a covering that his nakedness might not be seen. Therefore, the lights of heaven turned away. The day darkened that it might hide him who was stripped upon the Cross." End Quote. That's a reference to criminals being stripped down completely, held out for public indignity and shame.

It's interesting to note in Luke 9:23 that Jesus is not speaking only to his disciples at this point. He's speaking to them, but he's also speaking to others. He's speaking to a whole crowd of people, many of them unbelievers. Amazing, isn't it? This is the way Christ spoke to unbelievers. This is how he evangelized. He gave them the hard truth about discipleship. He

didn't soft pedal anything to them. Luke is very clear to show us this in verse 23. He's not speaking not just to his disciples. He had been talking directly to his disciples and only to them in verses 18-22.

But then Luke says, "He said to all." Mark tells us the same thing, Mark 8:34, "calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them," plural, to his disciples and the gathered crowd. We've got to understand that between verse 22 and verse 23, some time had passed. We don't know how long the conversation lasted on any given point. We do know that Peter's rebuke of Jesus for this prediction of suffering happened in here. We see that in Matthew 16, clearly. There was, there was more conversation that happened. We don't know how long any of that lasted on any given point, or where they were along the journey, but it does seem that they've come toward Caesarea Philippi, where there would be more people gathering, hearing about the popularity of Jesus that had preceded him.

All three synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they record Jesus' prediction of suffering, as we've said, Peter's confession, the prediction of suffering, then after Jesus' predicts his suffering and delivers that stern warning to silence, commanding that they keep the, the matter secret, as a

matter of operational security in all three Gospels, as I've said, though some time has passed, much has been discussed, the next thing we see Jesus doing, here, is evangelizing.

And he's calling, after he's said all that, he said, he's calling for total commitment, and the only promise he makes in the tract that he hands out, self-denial, cross-bearing. Only his close disciples know that he's the Christ. Only the Twelve know the prediction of his suffering. The crowds don't know. They'll know, know soon enough, in about six months' time. They'll know; they'll see for themselves.

But though the crowds don't know, Jesus still calls them to discipleship, and he tells them exactly what's involved. He doesn't sugar-coat it. He doesn't hold anything back. This is like the, the hard-to-swallow fine print you find on what would otherwise seem to be a very, very attractive contract for you. You start looking at the fine print. You say, whoa! This price I'm paying for this house, it comes with all these exceptions. Oh, there's a neighborhood association. Ugh! That's hard to swallow. Oh, they're going to tell me what color I can paint my house. Okay. You find all that in the fine print. This, here, is the fine print made bold. This is the small print writ large.



Jesus wants us to understand exactly what it is we are getting ourselves into when we profess to be his followers.