

## The Death of the Cross

By: Keith Keyser

“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.*” Phil. 2:9<sup>i</sup>

To modern people the cross is at best a ubiquitous Christian symbol or at worst a mere piece of jewelry. In the ancient world things were far different. In Bible times the cross was a form of execution, "...reserved for the most notable and notorious ne'er-do-wells of antiquity."<sup>ii</sup> It was not something one spoke about in polite company; nor was it a desirable end to one's life. Every facet of crucifixion was meant to demean and demoralize the condemned one. Though it meant a lonely, tortuous death, the Lord Jesus willingly went to Golgotha and laid down His life in obedience to His Father. To fathom the profound shame associated with this act, modern sentimentality about the cross must be stripped away. To appreciate what Christ did for His people one must perceive the humiliation connected with this form of execution.

### The Old Rugged Cross

In order to properly understand Christ's gracious work one must survey ancient opinions on His manner of death. To the Romans, crucifixion was an odious, humiliating process, kept in store for society's vilest dregs. One writer describes their revulsion in this way: "Origen called crucifixion *mors turpissima crucia* (the utterly vile death of the cross), and Cicero called it, 'that most cruel and disgusting penalty.' It was reserved for rebellious foreigners, violent criminals and robbers, and it was considered the typical punishment for slaves."<sup>iii</sup> Another adds: "...Cicero...expresses his feelings about crucifixion as follows: 'Far be the very name of a cross, not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens'."<sup>iv</sup> A third writer comments on the problems with which early Christians were confronted by pagan adversaries:

The shame of crucifixion was in fact to be widely utilized in precisely this fashion in later anti-Christian polemic. Caecilius, Minucius Felix's pagan interlocutor, reasoned as follows: 'To say that their ceremonies center on a man put to death for his crime and on the fatal wood of the cross is to assign to these abandoned wretches sanctuaries which are appropriate to them and the kind of worship they deserve.' Tacitus had already utilized the dishonor of the crucifixion of Jesus to cast aspersions on the Christian movement. 'Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.' The resulting 'disease' (*malum*) found its way to Rome, 'where all things horrible or shameful [*putenda*] in the world collect and find a vogue.' For Christians in Philippi, the sharp verticality of their social world would have served only to accentuate the foolishness and shamefulness of worshiping a crucified Christ.<sup>v</sup>

Suffice it to say that speaking of death by crucifixion in a Roman colony like Philippi would link the executed one with the lowest type of shame.

## The Jewish Opinion of Crucifixion

The Jewish view of the cross was just as bad as the Greco-Roman estimation of this gibbet of shame. Deuteronomy 21:23 affirms: "...he who is hanged *is* accursed of God." As Martin points out: "...[it] meant that the victim was outside the pale of Israel, and that he was under a ban of excommunication from God's covenant. It was this thought which proved the stumbling-block of the cross to the Jew (1 Cor. 1:23)..."<sup>vi</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls link this verse in Deuteronomy with crucifixion.<sup>vii</sup> Later Jewish literature scornfully refers to Jesus as *Ha-Talui* ("the Hanged One"), emphasizing that He died as a condemned and accursed One.<sup>viii</sup> Before, during, and after the time of Christ crucifixion and crucified people were repugnant to the Jewish mind.

Given the universal abhorrence of crucifixion in the ancient world, Philippians 2: 9 reveals the astonishing fact that the Lord Jesus voluntarily submitted to this sort of treatment. His unparalleled obedience to the Father's will is demonstrated by His willing self-sacrifice in such a humiliating way. He subordinated His own well-being to the overarching divine plan of redemption. So that the Father might be glorified, the Son laid down His life and abased Himself. His reputation was put in the dust that the Father's name might be exalted. God must be revealed as Just **and** the Justifier of the repentant sinner (Rom. 3:25-26.) God's love was unequivocally declared and His fathomless grace demonstrated for all of the universe to see (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 2:7; 3:10.)

Through the resurrection and ascension, the Father exalted the Son to the highest position in the universe for His selfless obedience, which previously led Him to such depths of humiliation. He who went lower than any other, is now exalted over all creation. Every human and angelic being will one day be compelled to confess His position at first place, declaring His peerless Lordship (Phil. 2:10-11.) Thus Christ's death on a cross is the unlikely launching point for the greatest rise in world history. Paul aptly used this truth to exhort the Philippian Christians to greater selflessness, mutual love, and unity. Elsewhere, he points to the tremendous blessings that comes to every believer and him through Christ's ignominious death. The benefits of His crucifixion are so vast that the apostle refuses to boast in anything else (Gal. 6:14.)

*Oh, my Saviour crucified,  
Near Thy cross would I abide,  
Gazing with adoring eye  
On Thy dying agony.*

*God is love I surely know,  
In the Saviour's depth of woe;  
In the Sinless, in God's sight,  
Sin is justly brought to light.*

*In His spotless soul's distress,  
I have learnt my guiltiness;  
Oh, how vile my low estate,  
Since my ransom was so great.  
-Robert Cleaver Chapman*

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<sup>i</sup> Emphasis mine; all Scripture references are from *The New King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982.

<sup>ii</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Friendship & Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994, p. 64.

<sup>iii</sup> David J. MacLeod, "Imitating the Incarnation of Christ: An Exposition of Philippians 2:5-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 158:631 (July 2001), Dallas: DTS, p. 328f. The quotes from Origen & Cicero may be referenced at Origen, Commentary on Matthew (27:22–26), quoted in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), xi; & Cicero, Against Verres 2.5.165, quoted in Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 8, n. 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 11*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987.

<sup>v</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, "The Humiliation of Christ in the Social World of Roman Philippi, part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 160 (Oct. 2003). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003, p. 427ff.

<sup>vi</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 11*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987, brackets mine.

<sup>vii</sup> Gerald G. O'Collins, "Crucifixion," in Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1996, p. 1207.

<sup>viii</sup> A google search of this term reveals that it is still a common slur against Jesus in certain quarters.