



## Why the Cross Offends

By Bob DeWaay

The cross was an executioner's device. It meant either a literal cross on which someone would be executed, or it meant living as one condemned to die (cross-bearing). Later Paul used the term "cross" to mean the message of the cross. It might surprise people today to learn that the term "cross" when used in the Bible never meant a Christian symbol. And yet many modern churchgoers see the cross as an endearing Christian symbol and have trouble understanding what it meant to the people who heard Jesus teach about it.

Consider therefore the implications of this teaching of Jesus: "*And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me'*" (Luke 9:23). This call to discipleship came in a section of Luke's gospel where the key issue was Jesus' identity. Herod had asked about it (Luke 9:7-9) and Jesus had asked what the people said about it (Luke 9:18). When He asked the disciples what they thought, Peter answered correctly "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:20). So far so good—but then came the utter shock: "*The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day*" (Luke 9:22). The Messiah would be rejected by the Jewish leadership and killed. Not only that, but his followers would have to live in this world as those condemned to die. That is what it meant to take up a cross.

Crucifixion was a horrible, cruel means of execution which the Romans used not on their own citizens, but on people they wished to intimidate, humiliate and make an example of. People who raised sedition against Rome were usually targeted. The Jewish people whom Jesus addressed had personal and corporate memories of crucifixion that made the concept horrifying and loathsome. Let me explain.

The Jewish historian Josephus described a number of incidents of crucifixion before the time of Christ. The first involves the infamous Antiochus Epiphanies in 167 BC, the same tyrant who desecrated the temple. Here is what Josephus wrote about that incident:

And indeed many Jews there were who complied with the king's commands, either voluntarily, or out of fear of the penalty that was denounced; but the best men, and those of the noblest souls, did not regard him, but did pay a greater respect to the customs of their country than concern as to the punishment which he threatened to the disobedient; on which account they every day underwent great miseries and bitter torments; for they were whipped with rods and their bodies were torn to pieces, and were crucified while they were still alive and breathed: they also strangled those women and their sons whom they had circumcised, as the king had appointed, hanging their sons about their necks as they were upon the crosses.[\[i\]](#)

The Jews were very concerned about the proper burial of their dead. By hanging bodies on crosses (even if that was not where they had died) Rome desecrated the Jewish dead and showed them to be cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23).

After the Jews were liberated from Antiochus in 164 under the Maccabees (or more correctly the Hasmoneans) there was an extended period of Jewish rule. All was not well, however, because one of the Hasmonean descendants, Alexander Janneus, (103-76 BC) became one of the cruelest tyrants to oppress the Jews.[\[ii\]](#) Some of his Jewish opponents resisted him, and he took cruel revenge against them. Josephus describes what happened:

[T]he Jews fought against Alexander, and being beaten were slain in great numbers in the several battles which they had, and when he had shut up the most powerful of them in the city Bethome, he besieged them therein; and when he had taken the city, and gotten the men into his power, he brought them to Jerusalem, and did one of the most barbarous actions in the world to them; for as he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of all the city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified; and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes.[\[iii\]](#)

This event remained in the Jewish collective memory for its barbarism and wicked cruelty to women and children. Crucifixion was a symbol of the torture of Jewish people by tyrants. But the story is not over.

In 4 BC, after the death of Herod the Great, a revolt against Roman rule erupted throughout Judea. Quintilius Varus, the Roman legate of Syria, brutally pacified the country, particularly in Galilee. Here is Josephus' description of what happened:

But Varus sent a part of his army into the country, against those that had been the authors of this commotion, and as they caught great numbers of them, those that appeared to have been the least concerned in these tumults he put into custody, but such as were the most guilty he crucified; these were in number about two thousand.<sup>[iv]</sup>

John MacArthur comments on this incident and applies it to Jesus' call to discipleship:

He [Varus] put their crosses up and down all the roads of Galilee, so people saw them everywhere they traveled. Every crucified Jew had carried his own crossbeam as he marched to death by crucifixion. These Galileans had seen all of that, and Jesus was talking to them in a historical context, saying they needed to be willing to face such a consequence rather than deny Him.<sup>[v]</sup>

Crucifixion was offensive to the Jews in every way. It stood for cruel tyranny by oppressors. It demeaned the Jews. It made them cursed according to their own law. It involved barbaric torture, and it took place where people were forced to witness it. That's the public mindset when Jesus taught about the cross.

So when Jesus said that He would die in such a cursed way and yet claimed to be the "Son of Man" (that Daniel claimed would have glory, dominion and a kingdom Daniel 7:13, 14), it was truly hard to believe (hence the title of MacArthur's book). And when Jesus said this: "*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must*

*the Son of Man be lifted up*” (John 3:14), He was saying that the promised Messiah would become a curse. Yes, hard to believe.

The people in Galilee who heard Jesus teach His own future crucifixion and declare their need to disavow self and to live daily as one sentenced to the cursed death indicated by cross-bearing must have been shocked. And worse, less than forty years earlier some of them saw brothers, uncles, fathers, or grandfathers hanged on crosses right there in Galilee – some 2,000 of them.

Jesus’ teaching about the cross was horrifying to them. How could anyone believe it? Who would ever want to be a disciple under such terms? We need to get the image of golden jewelry out of our minds and think about what the cross really was and how offensive it still is, especially to Jews. People in the seeker movement know this, and so they do not preach the cross. The cross will always offend the unregenerate mind.

So then how can anyone be saved? The disciples asked Jesus that very question and here is His answer: “Looking upon them, Jesus said, ‘With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God’” (Mark 10:27). The context was about the rich man who had so much in this world that he would not give it up for the sake of the kingdom. But all things are possible with God; and He can save sinners who are by nature and choice His enemies.

Paul explained it this way: “*But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1Corinthians 1:23, 24). This may indeed be hard to believe, but the preaching of the cross is God’s ordained means whereby He saves “the called.” We must resist the temptation to water down the Biblical message because of its native offense. God chooses the things that the world considers weak, foolish and base (1Corinthians 1:26, 27) to shame those who are wise in their own eyes.

This article was based on a sermon by Bob DeWaay that was preached on December 2, 2007 on Luke 9:18 – 27. It can be heard [here](#).

End Notes

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[i] Antiquities 12 chapter 5.

[ii] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 326, 327.

[iii] Antiquities 13 chapter 14.

[iv] Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1996, c1987). *The works of Josephus : Complete and unabridged*. Includes index. (Wars 2.75). Peabody: Hendrickson.

[v] John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe*, (Nelson: Nashville, 2003) 135.

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