

# The Reach of the Cross

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I want this morning to reflect with you on the Cross of Jesus.

In first Corinthians, the Apostle Paul makes a remarkable claim about the Cross. He writes:

I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.  
1 Cor 2:1-2 (KJV)

Why did the Apostle Paul, in coming to the Corinthians, focus so exclusively on the Cross? Why has the Cross played such a preeminent role in Christian theology? Even in the iconography of the Church, the Cross is absolutely central. Why is that?

In the Cross, the eternal Son of God enters fully into the human condition, takes on himself the totality of human sin and

pain, and once and for all extinguishes the power of evil over our lives. To accomplish so great a redemption, the Lord Jesus paid the ultimate cost. Truly, there is no greater suffering than what Christ experienced on the Cross.

But do we really believe that? Consider a diary entry by Anna Williams, a scientist active in the early part of the twentieth century. The Cross gave her no comfort. As she saw it, Jesus knew that his anguish would be momentary and that in exchange he would save the world. As she wrote in her diary, “This knowledge . . . if we were sure, oh! what would we not be willing to undergo.”

[[See John Barry, *The Great Influenza*, p. 273]]

How should we respond to Anna Williams? Does it help to note that the cross was the ultimate instrument of torture in the ancient world? Was Anna Williams therefore taking the sufferings of our Lord too lightly? As a cosseted ivory-tower intellectual, what did she know about suffering anyway? Didn't Christ on the Cross suffer more than she ever did in her bourgeois little world? Instead of whining about the Cross not being enough, shouldn't

she have gratefully accepted the redemption that could be hers only through the Cross?

But this response misses the point. Williams wasn't comparing her personal sufferings to those of Christ. Rather, she was asking about the *reach* of the Cross. Specifically, she was asking, *How far do Christ's sufferings on the Cross reach?* Williams suggests that Christ's sufferings have only limited reach since they are attenuated by all sorts of mitigating factors, especially their brief duration.

Christ's passion, after all, lasted only a matter of hours. By the standards of the day, his time on the Cross was short, beginning in the morning and ending in the afternoon. Yes, his scourging must be factored in as well. But crucifixion was common in the Roman empire, and most crucifixions lasted days rather than hours before the victim expired. Consequently, the physical suffering of our Lord was no more than that of many others brutalized by Rome.

I don't mean to make light of our Lord's physical suffering. But a movie like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does not convey the full measure of what Christ, in securing our redemption, endured on the Cross. Mel Gibson, a master of movie violence (going right back to his early Mad Max days), was clearly in his element in portraying the cruelty that Jesus experienced at the hands of the Romans. But by focusing so one-sidedly on the physical violence surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, Gibson missed the far deeper suffering of our Lord, for which the Cross was but an outward expression.

Let's be frank. If the entirety of Christ's suffering was the physical pain he endured on the Cross, then Christ's suffering on behalf of humanity has limited reach. Perhaps it can reach well-fed, heavily sedated, incessantly entertained westerners whose main afflictions are stress and disillusionment. But can it reach the whole of humanity and the worst of its afflictions?

Off the top of my head, there are many forms of death, degradation, and torment that are far worse than the few hours that Christ suffered at the hands of the Romans. Here are three:

- (1) Locked in syndrome, in which the body is completely without ability to move or respond but the mind remains fully conscious. Imagine your body being in this state, as a living coffin, for decades.
- (2) Being a long-term subject of Josef Mengele's medical experiments at the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz.
- (3) Being raped and tortured over a period of months by one of Saddam Hussein's sons for refusing his advances, and then finally being torn apart by his Doberman Pinschers.

Ask yourself, if you were faced with the horror of such circumstances, what comfort you would find in the Cross if all there were to it was the few hours required for Jesus' scourging

and crucifixion. What comfort would you find in Christ's words, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," if for all you can tell, Christ's suffering was markedly less than yours?

The church father Gregory of Nazianzus stressed that Christ cannot redeem what he has not taken on himself. The usual theological formula for stating this is "That which is not assumed is not redeemed." How can Christ overcome the sin of the world if his experience of the consequences of that sin are at best partial—if he has not fully drunk the cup of God's wrath against sin?

The brief window of time into which Christ's Passion was compressed is not the only problem here. In anticipating the Passion, Jesus gives every impression of knowing exactly what is to happen and when it is to happen. Everything seems scripted. Everything seems to happen on cue.

In John's Gospel we are told Jesus knew that Judas would betray him from the start. On the Cross, Jesus exclaims that God has abandoned him. The terror of that abandonment, however, ends no more than six hours later when Jesus utters "It is finished" and

gives up the ghost. Moreover, leading up to the Cross, Jesus has been continually assuring his disciples that he would rise again from the dead on the third day—a prophecy he fulfills once again right on cue.

Most of us, when we are in the throes of suffering, however, don't have the luxury of having our tribulation so neatly choreographed. We don't know exactly what to expect at what times and when the suffering will be over, if at all. Often we see no end to the suffering, and we don't know how things will turn out. Uncertainty about the course of suffering makes suffering doubly hard. And yet, by his knowledge of the future, our Lord seems blithely to have avoided this aspect of suffering.

What, then, is the reach of the Cross? Is it enough to embrace the totality of the human condition? I submit that it is. But to see this, we need to look beyond the physical agony of the Cross. The Cross points to a deeper reality of suffering that too often goes unappreciated, a reality of divine suffering that gets largely lost in films like *The Passion of the Christ*.

How, then, can we see that the reach of the Cross encompasses the full consequences of the Fall, including the full extent of human suffering? I'm not sure that with our finite minds we can fully comprehend the reach of the Cross. Nonetheless, we can catch glimpses of it.

Certain biblical images indicate that the suffering of the Cross cannot be confined merely to the few hours of Christ's earthly passion. Once Jesus has resurrected, he has Thomas place his fingers in the wounds that were inflicted on the Cross. Ask yourself, What is a resurrection body doing with the marks of crucifixion? And why, in the book of Revelation, is Christ portrayed as a lamb that was slain?

There's no indication in Scripture that the redeemed of Christ will in eternity exhibit any marks of suffering from their life on earth. And yet our Lord bears these marks in eternity, and is referred to, in Revelation, as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Clearly, then, the sufferings of Christ transcend his torture by the Romans.



Another factor to consider in understanding the reach of the Cross is Christ's complete willingness to embrace it. Most of us, when in pain and sorrow, look for a way of escape. Indeed, if there were some button we could press that would make our troubles disappear, most of us would press it. But most of the time no such button is available.

In giving himself up to be crucified, however, Jesus could at any time have called a halt to the proceedings. He informs the disciples that no one takes his life from him but that he lays it down freely. He adds that at any time he could call on twelve legions of angels to rescue him. According to a hymn sung on Good Friday, "He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross." Instead of the Cross holding Jesus, in reality Jesus upheld the Cross. What does it say about our Lord that he chose, on our behalf, to experience the utmost agony even though at any time he could have called it off?

Still another way to see that the reach of the Cross exceeds our first impressions comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the

doctrine of divine omniscience. God knows all things. But if God knows all things, does God know—really know from the inside out—the full conscious experience of human suffering? In particular, does he know what it feels like to experience the uncertainty of not knowing the outcome of suffering?

The philosopher Bertrand Russell, atheist though he was, offered a useful distinction when he differentiated two forms of knowledge: *knowledge by description* versus *knowledge by acquaintance*. I have knowledge by description of what it is like to climb Mount Everest. I have that knowledge because the climb up Mount Everest has been described to me. But I have no knowledge by acquaintance of climbing Mount Everest. I've never actually climbed a mountain and have no plans to do so.

Now consider God and his knowledge of human experience. Does he know human experience simply by description? Or does he also know it by acquaintance? And if by acquaintance, how deep is that acquaintance? If God only knew human experience by description, it would be like a fabulously wealthy king looking on

emaciated subjects who are dying of starvation. Even if this king eased the plight of his subjects and even if he assured them of how bad he felt on account of their pain, his role as comforter would be irremediably compromised.

That's why missionaries who live in mansions while the bulk of the population lives in hovels are never very impressive. As human beings, we have a fundamental need to be known, and being known means being known by acquaintance and not merely by description. Knowledge by description is available from books. But to know by acquaintance means getting your hands dirty in the full particularities of human experience. On the Cross, Christ has done exactly that. He has fully embraced the human condition. He knows it by acquaintance.

As a consequence, the doctrine of divine omniscience has inherent in it a paradox: to know everything, God must know by acquaintance the full measure of human experience and thus must know what it is not to know since not knowing (what we call "ignorance") is a basic feature of human finiteness. We know that

the Lord himself experienced this limitation since the Scriptures teach that the boy Jesus grew in grace and knowledge. Moreover, we find the mature Jesus telling his disciples that there are things the Father knows that he doesn't.

Note that I'm not here advocating openness theology, in which the future is taken to be something indefinite and therefore not knowable even by God. Openness theology flies in the face of Christian orthodoxy. In *The City of God* Augustine states that any being that does not know the future is not God. God's knowledge includes knowledge of the future. This is the orthodox position and the one I subscribe to.

When God becomes man in Jesus Christ, however, he sets aside divine omniscience. The point of God becoming man is for God to identify with the whole of human experience, and this is not possible if God in Christ retains divine privileges unavailable to humans. In particular, Christ on the Cross identifies with the whole of human suffering, and this includes the ignorance and uncertainty that intensify human suffering.

But how can this be? How can God in Christ so fully identify with humanity that he fully knows the full extent of human suffering? Can Christ look each of us in the eye and honestly tell us that because of what he endured on the Cross, he knows what each of us is going through *even better than we do ourselves?*

As Christians we want this to be true and, in our heart of hearts, we know it to be true. But how can it be true? There is a mystery here that our finite minds will never fully comprehend. Nonetheless, let me offer two considerations that may help.

First, we need to see the Cross as a window into a much deeper reality of divine suffering. For instance, the Scriptures teach that with God a day is as a thousand years. But if a day is as a thousand years, then each day in a thousand years is itself a thousand years. Thus, if you run the numbers, a day with God is also as 365 million years. Follow the math to its logical conclusion, and with God an instant is an eternity. For this reason, the mere six hours that Jesus hung on the Cross is no obstacle to God taking into himself the full sufferings of humanity.

Second, in the Incarnation, and especially on the Cross, Jesus identifies with humanity at the deepest level. In Colossians, Paul teaches that Christ is our life. In Galatians, Paul describes the believer as being crucified with Christ. In Philippians, Paul rejoices to share in the sufferings of Christ, so much so that our suffering becomes an expression of Christ's suffering. It's not that Christ vainly tries to imagine what we are suffering; when we suffer, it *is* Christ suffering.

We see this in Matthew, where our Lord describes the final judgment as a separation of goats and sheep. The crime of which the goats are guilty is that they did not show mercy to Christ as he suffered hunger, sickness, and imprisonment. But when the goats ask how they could have missed ministering to his needs, Jesus replies that what they failed to do for others they failed to do for him.

The failure here is the failure to follow Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself. This commandment does not mean that as we look in the mirror, we should think about how much we

esteem our own person and then determine in our hearts that we need to esteem others likewise (many of us esteem neither ourselves nor others very well). Rather, Jesus is talking about a bond that, as descendants of Adam and now the second Adam, holds all of humanity together.

We need to love our neighbor as our self because our neighbor *is* our self. In saying this, I'm not advocating an all-is-one pantheism of the sort popularized by the Beatles in their song "I Am the Walrus." There's a simple reason why our self and the self of others constitute a unity, and that is because our life and their life are Christ's life. Christ on the Cross sacrificed himself for the life of the world and thereby became the life of the world. In loving one another, we love Christ. In refusing to love one another, we refuse to love Christ.

Christ's identification with us in our limitation and weakness makes it possible for God to love us and to call us friends. In fact, it's not clear that any other religion or system of thought can account for God's love for humanity. Aristotle, for instance, saw

friendship as something possible only among equals.

Consequently, his unmoved mover God, so far above and distant from humanity, could never be its friend. Indeed, Aristotle's God thought only about himself since thinking about anything else would be degrading and therefore unworthy of God.

But in the Incarnation and then upon the Cross, God in Christ did degrade himself. The word "degrade" comes from the Latin and means to step down. God stepped down to save us. God's ultimate act of love is therefore the ultimate act of humility.

Not only did the exalted God who fills the heavens and whom the heavens cannot contain step down to our level, but he went as low as it is possible to go. As Paul teaches in second Corinthians, God made Christ "to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." The suffering servant passage in Isaiah makes the same point.

Aristotle's ethics is therefore radically incomplete. Despite the vast catalogue of virtues that fill out Aristotle's ethics, humility is nowhere to be found among them. Yet humility is the only virtue



that captures the love of God toward humanity, a love fully expressed in the Cross. Only by humility do Christ, and those who share his life, defeat the sin of pride that led to the Fall. Without humility, as Martin Luther noted, all the other virtues become merely occasions for pride (as in, “see how well I’m doing”).

The Cross shows how an infinite God can form a relationship of love and friendship with finite creatures. In mathematics there are two ways to go to infinity. One is to grow large without measure. The other is to form a fraction in which the denominator goes to zero. The Cross is a path of humility in which the infinite God becomes finite and then contracts to zero, only to resurrect and thereby unite a finite humanity within a newfound infinity.

This is why the Scriptures teach that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness. In contrast to Aristotle’s God, the Christian God’s does not meditate exclusively on himself. Rather, “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of those whose hearts are perfect toward him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9) Far from finding human

finiteness boring, God delights in it, finding creative possibilities that an unchangeable infinity cannot match.

I hope by now that you are beginning to glimpse how vast is the reach of the Cross. In particular, I hope it is now becoming clear that the Cross comprehends all of human suffering. But that raises a question: Why was the Cross necessary at all? If there was a rift between God and humanity, why was suffering (to wit, Christ's suffering on the Cross) the key to healing it?

The answer to this question is this: *In a fallen world, the only currency of love is suffering.* Indeed, the only way to gauge the extent to which one person loves another is by what that person is willing to endure for the other. Without the cost incurred by suffering, love among fallen creatures becomes cheap and self-indulgent. Suffering removes the suspicion that the good we do for one another is for ulterior motives, with strings attached, a quid pro quo.

Christ, by going to the Cross and there taking on himself the sin of the whole world, fully demonstrates the love of God.

Moreover, only such a full demonstration of God's love enables us to love God with all our heart. The extent to which we can love God depends on the extent to which God has demonstrated his love for us, and that depends on the extent of evil which God has had to absorb, suffer, and overcome on our behalf.

To say that love in a fallen world depends on suffering raises the question what love would look like in a nonfallen world. In a world untouched by sin, love is expressed through the gift of sacrifice. To see this, consider that the very existence of the world depends on a divine gift of sacrifice.

A common challenge to the Christian doctrine of creation is to ask whether in creating the world, God has not augmented himself since it would appear that God plus the world is greater than God alone. This is supposed to raise an insuperable difficulty for Christian orthodoxy, which regards God as perfect and thus as not improvable through the addition of some object external to God, like the world.

But, in fact, God plus the world is less than God alone. To see this, consider that God could have created any number of worlds. Thus, in creating this one, God, far from expanding himself, instead contracted himself. The lesson here is that even apart from evil and sin, it is possible for intelligences (whether created or uncreated) to give irrevocably so as to deny and thereby sacrifice other options.

Christian theology has always regarded God's creation of the world as an act of love. In the act of creation, God gives himself irrevocably to this world to the exclusion of all others. Creation is a gift of sacrifice. As beings created in God's image, we are likewise able, and indeed called, to offer such gifts of sacrifice. Moreover, such acts of love would be ours to perform even if we had never sinned.

In a fallen world, however, sacrifice by itself is not enough to assure love. The problem is that fallen creatures know very well about delayed gratification, sacrificing an immediate good for a greater benefit down the road. This is not to say there's anything

wrong with delayed gratification of rewards or sacrifice in this sense. But sacrifice ceases to be a gauge for love when it becomes an instrument of exchange, part of a system of reciprocity in which persons are duly compensated for costs incurred.

This is why Jesus remarks, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” In laying down his life at the Cross, Jesus offered himself in a sacrifice of suffering that cannot be compensated (certainly not by us). Only the sacrifice of a suffering that cannot be compensated is a true gauge of love in a fallen world.

It is vital here to have a correct picture of Christ’s redemption and our role in it. In allowing evil and then redeeming us from it, God is not an arsonist who starts a fire, let’s things heat up for us, and then, at the last moment, steps in so that he can be the big hero. Nor is God a casual bystander, who sees a fire start spontaneously and then lets it get out of control so that he can be the big hero to rescue us.

We are the arsonists. We started the fire. God wants to rescue us not only from the fire we started but also, and more importantly, from our disposition to start fires, that is, from our life of arson. But to rescue us from a life of arson requires that we know the seriousness of what arson can do.

Fires always start out small. If God always instantly put out the fires we start, we would never appreciate the damage fires can do. God therefore allows the fire that we have started in consenting to evil to rage, but not so that he can be a big hero when he rescues us from it but so that we can rightly understand the human condition and come to our senses. In rescuing us, God does end up being a hero. But that is not the point. The point is to fix a broken relationship between God and humanity.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus beseeched the Father that if it were possible, to let this cup pass from him. To this the Father replied, “Son, I wish it were possible, but there’s no other way.” Our sin demanded the ultimate cost. It is a cost our Lord

willingly paid on the Cross. He bears the marks of the Cross to this day.

Throughout this message I have focused on the love that Christ demonstrated for us through his sufferings on the Cross. In closing, I ask you to reflect on the Father's love in willingly giving up his son on our behalf:

How Deep the Father's Love for Us

By Stuart Townend

How deep the Father's love for us,  
How vast beyond all measure  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure

How great the pain of searing loss,  
The Father turns His face away  
As wounds which mar the chosen One,  
Bring many sons to glory

Behold the Man upon a cross,  
My sin upon His shoulders  
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice,  
Call out among the scoffers

It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished

I will not boast in anything  
No gifts, no power, no wisdom  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ  
His death and resurrection

Why should I gain from His reward?  
I cannot give an answer  
But this I know with all my heart  
His wounds have paid my ransom

AMEN