

**Ad-Mission Campaign**  
*The Uniqueness and Exclusivity of Jesus*

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**Introduction:**

Listen as I read the transcripts from two of the Ad-Mission commercials:

“You’re Crazy”

“The Only”

Each of these commercials captures a crucial question or objection that the postmodern mind has with biblical Christianity. The postmodern mind hears Christianity loud and clear. They get our message; they simply reject it on the merits of their worldview. They know that biblical Christianity lays the claim of “uniqueness” on Jesus. Thus, they respond, “You’re crazy!” To claim that some guy lived thousands of years ago, claimed to be God, did a few miracles, walked on water, got himself killed, and then came back to life simply flies in the face of scientific truth. Result: They reject the message as utterly unfounded and crazy.

Characteristic #1 of the postmodern world: the devaluing of objective truth.

Secondly, the postmodern mind knows that biblical Christianity makes the claim that Jesus is the only way. We will call this claim the “exclusivity” claim. They respond, “Whatever!” To claim that there is only one way to God or truth is absurd to the postmodern. To their minds, we are to be way past the time of imperialism and colonialism. This is the age of tolerance. So for Christianity to make a claim of exclusivity is flat out arrogant.

Characteristic #2 of the postmodern world: the valuing of tolerance.

These commercials, however, were not made by postmodern minds as attacks on Christianity; they were made by Christians with the hope that they might build a relational bridge to the postmodern mind who does not think we know the questions and objections they raise. We do know your questions. We do hear your objections.

We simply ask, “What if it’s true?”

Two claims – two objections. Christianity claims the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ. Postmoderns object with their outcries of “Foolishness!” and “Arrogance!” But there really is nothing new under the sun. Both of these claims and both of these responses have existed for two thousand years. In fact, we find them both in the pages of the NT.

Let’s look at the cross of Jesus Christ this morning.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save

those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a **stumbling block** to Jews and **folly** to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

There were two groups of people in the world at the time of Jesus: Jews and Gentiles. Both parties objected to the preaching of the cross but for the very same reason. The Jews regarded the claim of a crucified Messiah as utterly unthinkable and the Gentiles regarded the idea of a crucified king as completely outlandish. So the Jews stumbled over the message – they couldn't accept the Christian gospel because they couldn't accept the notion of a crucified Messiah. Meanwhile, the Gentiles rejected the Christian gospel because they thought it was utter folly that a Jewish king should die such a shameful death.

Not too long ago a book was published with the title: *What was God doing on the Cross?* It appears that there are two questions being asked, not one. First, "What was **God** doing on the cross?" Why was the God-man impaled on a Roman cross? It seems shocking that **God** should be crucified? Second, "What was God **doing** on the cross?" Once we've agreed that the God-man was on the cross, we wonder, "what was he **doing** there?" What was he accomplishing? To what end and for what purpose was Jesus, the God-man, suffering?

#### A. *The Obscenity of the Cross*

Noted NT scholar, Don Carson suggests that any attempt to understand the sufferings of Christ must reckon with the fact that "two thousand years of pious Christian tradition have largely domesticated the cross, making it hard for us to realize how it was viewed in Jesus' time" (Carson, 573).

Both the painful and shameful aspects of crucifixion have become blurred, and no matter what we may think we know about this manner of execution, it simply does not mean the same thing for us as it did to those living in the first century.

Unfortunately, the NT record itself does not provide much information concerning the details of crucifixion. Indeed, there is a remarkable brevity and restraint on the part of all 4 gospel authors when it comes to the actual crucifixion of Jesus. All that is said (in Mt. 27:35a; Mark 15:24a; Luke 23:33; and John 19:18) is that "*they crucified him.*" Why is so little recorded for us? There are at least two reasons:

- In the first place, crucifixion was so frequent and its details such common knowledge that they must certainly have believed it unnecessary to be more precise. People in the first century were all too painfully familiar with crucifixion.
- More important is the fact that crucifixion was so utterly repugnant, so indescribably shameful that they deemed it improper to go beyond the barest minimum in describing our Lord's experience of it. More on this later.

We must remember that the theological significance of the cross cannot be separated from the historical and physical event itself. The following details, therefore, are not designed to arouse morbid curiosity, but to remind us of the lengths to which Jesus had to go to redeem us from sin.

Elements involved in crucifixion:

- 1) The *kinds* of crosses used would vary according to their shape: **X**, **T**, **t** were the most common forms.
- 2) The *height* of the cross was also important. Usually the victim's feet would be no more than one to two feet above the ground. This was so that wild beasts and scavenger dogs common

in the city might feed on the corpse. Martin Hengel (*Crucifixion*, 9) quotes Pseudo-Manetho as saying,

"Punished with limbs outstretched, they see the stake as their fate; they are fastened and nailed to it in the most bitter torment, evil food for birds of prey and grim pickings for dogs."

- 3) The *nails* were spikes used to impale the victim to the tree. In 1968 in a cemetery at Gi'vat Ha-Mivtar (near Jerusalem), a bulldozer unearthed the skeletal remains of a man named "John" who had been crucified:

"The feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixed by the same nail at the heels, with the legs adjacent; the knees were doubled, the right one overlapping the left; the trunk was contorted; the upper limbs were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm" (cited in Lane, 565).

- 4) The crucified man's right tibia, the larger of the two bones in the lower leg, had been brutally fractured into large, sharp slivers, perhaps to hasten his suffocation by making it virtually impossible to push himself up the vertical beam, an action required to sustain breathing.
- 5) Often times a small peg or block of wood, called a *sedecula*, was fixed midway up the vertical beam, providing a seat of sorts. Its purpose was to prevent premature collapse and thus prolong the victim's agony.
- 6) The precise cause of death has been debated for years. D. A. Carson summarizes:

"Whether tied or nailed to the cross, the victim endured countless paroxysms as he pulled with his arms and pushed with his legs to keep his chest cavity open for breathing and then collapsed in exhaustion until the demand for oxygen demanded renewed paroxysms. The scourging, the loss of blood, the shock from the pain, all produced agony that could go on for days, ending at last by suffocation, cardiac arrest, or loss of blood. When there was reason to hasten death, the execution squad would smash the victim's legs. Death followed almost immediately, either from shock or from collapse that cut off breathing" (574).

It is hard to imagine a more hideous form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was believed to be an effective deterrent in the ancient world and was thus frequently employed. For example:

- Appian reported that following the defeat of *Spartacus*, the victor Crassus had 6,000 prisoners crucified on the Via Appia between Capua and Rome (*Bella Civilia*, I.120). Before their final battle, Spartacus himself had a Roman prisoner crucified to warn his men of their fate should they be defeated.
- It is strangely ironic that Julius Caesar was hailed as being merciful to his enemies when he ordered their throats cut prior to their being crucified in order to spare them the indescribable suffering of prolonged agony on the cross.
- Josephus described the fate of the Jews taken captive in 70 a.d. when Jerusalem was destroyed. The soldiers, "out of the rage and hatred they bore the prisoners, nailed those they caught, in different postures, to the crosses, by way of jest, and their number was so great that there was not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies" (cited in Hengel, 25-26). Josephus indicates that the Roman general Titus hoped that this would hasten surrender of those still in the besieged city.

Worse than the pain of the cross, was the **shame** of the cross. The cross was itself the embodiment and emblem of the most hideous of human obscenities. The cross was a symbol of reproach, degradation, humiliation, and disgust. It was aesthetically repugnant. In a word, the cross was **obscene**.

### **The Symbolism of the Cross – A Cross of Shame**

The cross was far more than an instrument of capital punishment. It was a public symbol of indecency and social indignity. Crucifixion was designed to do more than merely kill a man. Its purpose was to humiliate him as well. The cross was intended not only to break a man's body, but also to crush and defame his spirit. There were certainly more efficient means of execution: stoning (cf. Stephen in Acts 7), decapitation (cf. James in Acts 12), etc. **Crucifixion was used to humiliate as well as to harm.**

What evidence is there to support this understanding of the symbolic meaning of crucifixion?

1. Crucifixion was always *public*. In fact, the most visibly prominent place was selected, usually at a crossroads, in the theatre, or elsewhere on high ground. The reason was to intensify the sense of social and personal humiliation.
2. Victims were usually crucified *naked*. Jewish sensitivities, however, demanded that the victim wear a loincloth. In the Bible physical nakedness was often a symbol of spiritual shame and ignominy. John Calvin wrote:

"The Evangelists portray the Son of God as stripped of His clothes that we may know the wealth gained for us by this nakedness, for it shall dress us in God's sight. God willed His Son to be stripped that we should appear freely, with the angels, in the garments of his righteousness and fullness of all good things, whereas formerly, foul disgrace, in torn clothes, kept us away from the approach to the heavens" (194).

3. The ancient assessment of crucifixion is seen in the way it was dealt with in their *literature*.
  - Historians once mistakenly assumed that the scarcity of references to crucifixion in cultured literary sources was proof that it was rarely employed. More recently it has been determined that the more refined literary artists omitted reference to crucifixion, not because it was unknown, but because they did not want to disgrace or defile their work by mentioning such a vile and obscene practice.
  - In Greek romances and the theatre, crucifixion of the hero/heroine was routine, but in every instance he/she was delivered from the cross and set free. In other words, heroes could not on any account be allowed to suffer such a shameful death. This was one reason why the notion of a *crucified savior* was "foolishness" to the Greeks.
  - Crucifixion was referred to as *crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium*, or "that most cruel and disgusting penalty." Pliny the Younger (112) called Christianity a "perverse and extravagant superstition" because it preached Christ crucified (*Epistulae*, 10.96.4-8). Tacitus called it a "pernicious superstition."
4. The shame associated with crucifixion was so intense that *it was expressly forbidden that a Roman citizen be executed in that manner*. Cicero wrote:

"Even if we are threatened with death, we may die free men. But the executioner, the veiling of the head, and the very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but the liability to them, the expectation, nay the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man" (*Defence of Rabirius*, 5,16).

5. The symbolic emphasis of the cross in the ancient world is also seen in *the practice of hanging on a cross the corpse of a man who had been executed by some other means*. What possible reason would there be for doing this, except to subject his name/reputation to the worst possible social indignity?

6. The shame of the cross explains *Paul's early opposition to the church and its gospel*.

Paul was "ravaging" the church (Acts 8:3; a word that literally refers to a wild beast tearing at its prey, ripping flesh from bone); he was "breathing murderous threats" at the church (Acts 9:1); he "persecuted" the church "to the death" (Acts 22:4); he was "furiously enraged" at the church (Acts 26:11); and "tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13). Why?

It wasn't primarily because the church claimed that Jesus was God incarnate, nor because of any perceived threat to the Mosaic law or the Temple (although that accusation was raised; cf. Acts 6:13). The principal stumbling-block for Paul was that ***Jesus had been crucified. A crucified messiah was a contradiction in terms***. One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion. But one cannot have a Messiah who is himself crucified! The concept of the Messiah evoked images of power, splendor, and triumph, whereas that of crucifixion spoke of weakness, degradation, and defeat.

Whether or not Jesus deserved to die was beside the point. Whether or not his death was a miscarriage of justice was irrelevant. The point of the Christian gospel is that he was *crucified*, and that was unacceptable.

Beyond the cultural resistance to such an idea, Paul and others could only think of Deut. 21:23 - "*Anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse*." In Jewish law this "meant the corpse of a judicially executed criminal was hung up for public exposure that branded him as cursed by God. The words were also applied in Jesus' day to anyone crucified; and therefore the Jews' demand that Jesus be crucified rather than banished was aimed at arousing maximum public revulsion toward him" (Carson, 574).

What Saul of Tarsus was hearing proclaimed by Christians was that *he who was to enjoy God's richest blessing instead endured God's most reprehensible curse. How could these Jews honor as God and Savior one whom God himself had openly and obviously cursed?* Worse than a contradiction in terms, a crucified Messiah was an outrageous blasphemy!

Thus the offense of the cross does not come from the fact that it is theologically incoherent or intellectually illogical or legally impermissible. *The offense of the cross came from the fact that the cross, itself a visible symbol and physical embodiment of moral shame, aesthetic repugnance, and divine curse was the instrument of death for him who claimed to be Messiah and Savior.*

**Conclusion:**

Now, let's return to our opening question: What was God doing on the cross?  
Jesus was not only dying for the *guilt of my sins*; but he was bearing the *shame of my sins*.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood;  
Sealed my pardon with his blood,  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

Guilty, vile and helpless we;  
Spotless Lamb of God was he;  
'Full atonement' can it be?  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!"

Philippians 2:5-8 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

What God doing on the cross? He was purchasing my salvation.

Join with Paul in saying Galatians 6:14

Galatians 6:14 (ESV)

<sup>14</sup> But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Oh the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus. No one else can take my sin and shame.