



## CHRISTIANITY|EXPLORED

WHAT'S THE BEST NEWS YOU'VE EVER HEARD?

### Episode 4: The Cross

Sometimes there is a world of difference between the way things seem to be and the way things really are.

Twenty minutes before midnight on Sunday 14th April 1912, passengers on the upper decks of the Titanic felt three small bumps as the ship collided with an ice-berg.

But most people thought nothing of it. In fact, some picked up ice that had fallen onto the deck, and started playing snow-balls.

Below deck, however, things were very different. The ship's hull had buckled in several places. Rivets started to pop out below the waterline. Suddenly, Titanic was laid wide open to the Atlantic Ocean. Within three hours, the ship that was thought to be "unsinkable" had been completely swallowed up by the sea – together with 1589 passengers.

The question is, what do we see as we look at ourselves?

Do we only see the upper deck, the way we seem on the surface? Or are we able to see the way things really are, deep down?

You may have wondered why the cross is the symbol of Christianity. Why on earth would followers of Christ want to remind themselves of his death – especially a death that was so gruesome and agonizing?

But there's another way of seeing Jesus' death. Not as a tragic waste of life. But as a rescue.

If the problem deep down in our hearts is as serious as Jesus claims, then the cross suddenly becomes incredibly precious. Because those two pieces of wood are the only lifeboat we have.

Unlike most of the deaths we read about in biographies, Jesus went to his death willingly, and quite deliberately. In fact, he came to be killed, and he knew it. Here's what Mark says about Jesus in chapter 8 verse 31, and note that the phrase "Son of Man" is Jesus' way of referring to himself.

*"He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." (Mark 8:31)*

So Jesus taught his followers that he must be killed. And he tells us why in Mark chapter 10 verse 45:

*"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:45)

To understand exactly what that means, we need to read an account of Jesus' death.

*"They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.*

*"It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself.'*

*"In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.' Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.*

*"At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.*

*"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' – which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

*"When some of those standing near heard this, they said, 'Listen, he's calling Elijah.'*

*"One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,' he said.*

*"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.*

*"The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"* (Mark 15:22-39)

"At the sixth hour, darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour." Now Mark is counting according to the Jewish system of time keeping, so the sixth hour would have been the middle of the day. At the very moment when the sun should have been at its brightest, darkness fell.

All this takes place during the Jewish festival of Passover, a festival that was always held during a full moon. So the darkness Mark tells us about cannot be a solar eclipse. Something else is happening here.

Time and again in the Bible, light symbolizes God's favour, while darkness represents God's anger and judgment. Something supernatural is occurring at the cross, and the clear message is that God is angry.

Now we won't understand this if we see God's anger as something that is unpredictable and wild, the product of a quick temper. Some of us have seen that kind of anger in ourselves, in friends and close relatives, and we know how ugly it is.

But God's anger is not like that. It is his settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is wrong. Wrongdoing matters to God, whether we ourselves have done it to others, or if it has been done to us – and some

of us have been treated terribly in our lives. God cares about that. Because he is a God of love, and a God of justice, he cannot simply ignore wrongdoing as if it did not matter. After all, we care about the wrongdoing we see in the world. Can we expect our loving Creator to care any less?

So as Jesus was dying on the cross, darkness came over the whole land. God was acting in anger to punish sin. Listen to Jesus' words in chapter 15 verse 34:

*"At the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice 'Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?' - which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"* (Mark 15:34)

On the cross, Jesus was in some way "forsaken" or abandoned by God, as God punished sin.

But Jesus had led a completely sinless life. Not even his fiercest enemies could find any fault with him. So why would God be punishing him? And why is Jesus allowing himself to go through this?

Remember that Jesus said he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The remarkable truth is that Jesus is giving himself up to be punished on our behalf. He is bearing the punishment that our sin deserves, so that we can be rescued.

It's not as if God the Son is some innocent third party being picked on by God the Father. As the Bible says elsewhere, "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus". In other words, Jesus was fully God.

As we look at the cross, we see God rescuing us by sacrificing himself.

Remember the public gallery containing the record of your life. All of your thoughts, words and actions are up on the walls for everyone to see. There's lots there that we would feel reasonably proud of, but if we're honest, there are other things that we'd want to remain hidden – perhaps especially in our thought life.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, once sent a message to the twelve most respectable people he knew, to see how they'd respond. The message simply said: "Flee, all is revealed!" Within 24 hours, six of these "respectable people" had left the country.

We all have secrets that we would hate to have exposed, but the Bible tells us that all of it has been recorded. Not just the way we've treated others, but the way we've treated God as well.

And all of this separates us from God.

But because Jesus took our sin upon himself, he suddenly experienced a terrible sense of being in some way separated from his Father. That's why Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as he hung on the cross.

Jesus was taking upon himself all the punishment that our sin, everything on this film, deserves.

It's a stunning truth. He died as my substitute. In my place. Taking the punishment I deserve.

The result of Jesus' extraordinary self-sacrifice is this: Jesus paid the price for our sin, so that we never have to. The amazing reality is that Jesus loved me enough to die for my sin – for my sin, and for the sin of everyone who puts their trust in him.

It's as if the film has been wiped completely clean.

And if we want a demonstration that our sin really has been paid for, that Jesus' rescue really was successful, remember what Mark tells us in verses 37 and 38.

*"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.*

*"The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."* (Mark 15:37-38)

With those words, Mark records the exact moment of Jesus' death, but then turns his attention to something that happens simultaneously in the temple, which is on the other side of the city. He wants us to understand that the two events are connected in some way.

When Jesus dies, the 30 foot high curtain in the temple, which was as thick as the span of a man's hand, was torn from top to bottom.

The thick curtain used to hang in the temple, dividing the people from the place where God was said to live. The curtain was like a big "no entry" sign. It said loudly and clearly that it's impossible for sinful people like you and me to walk into God's presence. Then suddenly, as Jesus dies on the cross, the curtain is ripped in two, by God, from top to bottom. It's as if God is saying, "Because of the cross, the way is now open for people to approach me. Their sin has been finally and fully paid for."

Mark's description of Jesus' death also focuses on the reactions of people who witness it. I wonder who you most identify with?

One group of people is the soldiers. It's their job to carry out the execution. This is how they react to the cross:

*"Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get."* (Mark 15:24)

For these soldiers, the main legacy of the cross is Jesus' clothes. They are absorbed in doing their job, and they do it very well. But in doing that, and in their desire for material things, they miss what is going on right in front of their eyes.

Many of us go through life doing our duty, working hard, paying the bills. The day-to-day busyness of our intense lives blinds us to the true significance of the cross.

Another group of people to witness the crucifixion are the religious leaders. Mark tells us that they mock Jesus among themselves.

*"He saved others ... but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe."* (Mark 15:31-32)

These religious leaders are convinced that they already know the way to God, and the cross is not a part of that route. To them, the cross is nothing but a demonstration of weakness. They don't see that if Jesus were to come down from the cross, their sin could never be paid for.

It is often those of us who think of ourselves as "spiritual" or religious who are the most vicious enemies of the cross. Because we consider ourselves to be righteous and moral people, we will only deal with our sin on our own terms.

And then there's Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. He has a sign fixed to the cross. It reads: "THE KING OF THE JEWS". Mark makes it clear that Pilate knows Jesus is innocent. He offers to release Jesus, but the crowd want a man called Barabbas released instead. Time and again Pilate sticks up for Jesus. But in the end, he hands Jesus over

to be crucified. So why does Pilate hand over an innocent man to be killed?

*"Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."* (Mark 15:15)

Pilate is a crowd-pleaser. Although he knows that Jesus is innocent, the sound of the crowd causes him to lose his nerve, and he gives in to the evil desires of others. When he faces a world that despises Jesus, his good intentions are overcome by his own cowardice.

That's something most of us suffer from. Our longing for the approval of others makes us behave in ways that we know are wrong. What will people think of me if I were to start trusting Jesus?

By showing us these different reactions, it's as if Mark is saying, "OK, this is how others responded to what happened. What about you? What do you see as you look at the cross?"

Are we too busy like the soldiers? Too self-righteous like the religious leaders? Or too cowardly like Pilate?

But we've missed someone important.

Because Mark also records the reaction of a Roman centurion, a hard-bitten soldier who was a high-ranking military officer. This is how Mark describes it.

*"And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"* (Mark 15:39)

This man had doubtless fought many campaigns and seen many men die, but he'd never seen a man die like this.

So our final possibility as we look at what happened at the cross is to do what the centurion did: we can recognize that Jesus is telling the truth. That he is indeed the Son of God.

Right at the heart of London is the Old Bailey, the home of British justice. At the top is the golden statue of Lady Justice. She holds the scales of justice in one hand and the sword of judgment in the other. The message is clear: if we are found to be guilty, then the sword of judgment must fall.

But just across the London skyline from the Old Bailey, on top of St. Paul's Cathedral, is another golden symbol. It's a cross. And it's a powerful reminder that although the sword of God's judgment must fall, it fell on Jesus Christ.

So what will you do with your sin? Will you take it with you to the grave and to the judgment that must fall? Or will you let Jesus take it to the cross, and be rescued?

According to some reports, the orchestra on the deck of the Titanic played a hymn as the ship was sinking. The first line of that hymn speaks of rescue, not from the icy water of the Atlantic, but from a greater enemy. A rescue from sin and death. A rescue that removes the separation between sinful people and the loving God who made them. A rescue that is only possible through the death of God's only Son.

The words of the old hymn go like this:

*"Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee. Even though it be a cross that raises me."*