



THE CROSS

There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. Paul declares the cross the very core of the Gospel. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world—even life itself. When we consider all that Jesus did there, we stand amazed.

THE CROSS • Philippians 2:5–11 • Tim McConnell • April 14, 2019

Today is Palm Sunday—the Sunday we enter into Jesus’ Passion Week in Jerusalem, the week that led to His crucifixion and then His resurrection we celebrate next Sunday on Easter. That’s why these kids were up here whipping those palm branches around (which I love). Here’s how Mark records it: “When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” (Mark 11:7–10). The whole thing fulfills reams of prophecy about the coming of the liberating Messiah. Jesus, lifted up. Everyone else walking, He’s riding, but on a donkey, with palms and cloaks laid down before Him. They were excited. They had seen His miracles and His power. But the kingdom He brought wasn’t going to be established by worldly power and force and violence. Jesus was riding a path of humility, obedience, subjugation, powerlessness, even death. To put it in cheesy terms maybe: Jesus wasn’t on a power trip, He was making power flip.

So, we read a different passage—Philippians 2. It’s sometimes called the Christ Hymn because it might have been a song the church sang in worship; it’s so lyrical, so balanced, and tells the whole story of redemption. It breaks down the journey of Christ into two parts—His humiliation and His exaltation. Humiliation and exaltation. Which one was Palm Sunday? Was that part of the exaltation? Everyone is singing and dancing and giving Him all kinds of honors, but it’s not part of His exaltation; it’s part of His humiliation. Jesus is still going down. He is still going low, and the lowest is yet to come—the cross, and the grave, and the separation from God His own Father we call “hell.” He went all the way down for us. We think power is about getting the upper hand, taking the world by force. Jesus shows us another way. Napoleon Bonaparte wrote, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for him.”

God didn’t want a Kingdom of coercion established by force. God didn’t want a Kingdom of fearful

subjects. God wants a family of beloved and loving children. Jesus doesn’t want your frightened subjugation; He wants your love and He wants you to be loved. Leadership isn’t about how many you can make serve you; it’s about how many you can make yourself serve. So, Jesus didn’t ride into Jerusalem in force like a general in triumph but humbly on a donkey. It was His humiliation, not His exaltation. He was on the way down. But why? Just to demonstrate servant leadership? No, more than that. Jesus went this low to draw out the poison. Jesus went this low to take up, to sop up, the sickness that leads to death at the bottom of the human condition. He went that low to heal. As we will see today, His humility leads to His exaltation. When we follow Him through His death, it leads to life.

I grew up watching all the Rocky movies. Rocky Balboa. And you know how he beat all his opponents, don’t you? He beat them by being beaten. He took the punch. He would just let them fire off as much power and energy to destroy him as they could, and he took it. Then he punched back! Just watched Rocky IV with Peter the other day. That’s the best one! For a more updated reference, how about Star Wars: The Last Jedi. Luke Skywalker’s last heroic act to save everybody in the whole universe was what? To take the punch. The evil empire fired every laser cannon, photon torpedo, blaster they had at him. Spoiler alert—that’s how the battle is won. He drains evil of all its energy. Every good war movie has somebody running out there to take fire and save their friends. Who is brave enough to draw the fire? Who is strong enough to take the punch? Who can stand there and take all the pain, all the force of evil, all the power of hatred, all the destructive human sin on himself?

Only Jesus: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus is the ultimate example of humility. Nobody had more to give up. Nobody went lower. Nobody can match His glory. **Nobody had more to give up.** He was God. He is God. But He did not use His position as personal advantage. In the world we live

in, we are told to use every advantage, take every opportunity, push to the front, sweet talk your way to the top, get your interests pushed ahead, slip a little over here to get your kid into the top college. Watch Jesus. Nobody had more to give up, but...

Nobody went lower. Jesus “made himself nothing.” Jesus “emptied himself.” How can God empty Himself? How can divinity become vulnerable and still be divinity? Answer: by drawing humanity into itself. That’s exactly what happened here. Jesus didn’t subtract divinity; He added humanity. This is God’s willful self-humiliation, bringing humanity close to Himself, into Himself, in Jesus. An old catechism from the Reformation asks: “In what does Christ’s humiliation consist? Christ’s humiliation consisted in his being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time” (Westminster Shorter). He didn’t just taste a drop of death and fly back up to heaven. He didn’t just stare death down and turn around. He sat in death. It’s all of a piece, this mission of Jesus, starting from birth on. Who can take the punch? Who can draw out the poison that sickens the whole world? Jesus took on humanity to make Himself the target. “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8). In order to draw out the poison, in order to let humanity pour out its worst on Him, Jesus had to become poison-able. The all-powerful had to become hurt-able; wound-able, spit-on-able, strike-able, crucify-able. In the most surprising, astounding, awe-inspiring move, God Himself became vulnerable.

To His shame? Should we be embarrassed for God? No. In fact, having done all this, **Nobody can match His glory.** Jesus descended in His humiliation, He descended into humanity, He descended into vulnerability, and He even descended into obedience, powerlessness and death. He, the most powerful, embraced ultimate vulnerability. Why? To draw the poison out. And right here, not immediately but slowly, right here, the music starts to change. Through Good Friday, the long silence of Holy Saturday, the music starts to change. His humiliation is over. His exaltation begins: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every

knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9–11). None can match His glory. None can match His name. He has already taken the punch. He has already taken the poison. He has drawn all the fire of the evil forces. He has taken it all—and He lives. He lives! Now, what can stand against Him? That’s the humiliation that leads to the exaltation. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. He will claim all that He has won, and put to rights all that was wrong, and free all who call on Him—and every sentient being will be on its knees before Him to know that He is Lord. Willingly or unwillingly. Jesus is Lord.

Now, two applications. The first one might surprise you. **(1) You are allowed to be mad at God.** Does that sound like the opposite of what I’ve been preaching? A little. No, we don’t want to join the voices shouting and spitting on Jesus in the rebellion of our fallen natures. We don’t want to shout “Crucify Him.” But, listen, Jesus came to draw out the poison—that means He wants to draw the poison out of you. It’s still in you. And for that to happen, you have to trust Him and show Him your feelings, where it hurts, where you’re mad, where it isn’t fair. It’s okay. Show Him your heart. He doesn’t heal wounds you don’t let Him see. Second, the application you were more expecting, **(2) Follow the path of Jesus.** Back up to verse 5: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). Imitate; take the mental posture of; have the same mindset as. We can’t repeat what Jesus did, but we are called to follow in His way, if we are in Christ. Why continue in the track of influence through greater power and force when Jesus showed us the way of humiliation and exaltation? Follow Him down and let Him lift you up.

In his book, *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch says we want very much to continue in the way of authority with no vulnerability, endless exaltation with no humiliation. I want to be so powerful, nobody can touch me. It doesn’t work that way in this life. There is no place apart from pain. And the surprising thing is that there is so much life to be lived on the other side of opening up, on the other side of embracing vulnerability. You have to be careful, but we try so hard to protect ourselves and our power. Maybe Christ is calling us to descend into true humility, into

service of others, into genuine helpfulness. Maybe there's more flourishing on the other side of embracing vulnerability. Outside of your comfort zone. We work very hard to wrap ourselves and what we value in protective insulation. Crouch says, "the greatest spiritual struggle many of us face is to be willing to take off our bubble wrap." Jesus took off the bubble wrap. Jesus made Himself woundable. He came from heaven to earth to join forever with us, with fallen humanity, to take the punch, to draw out the poison, and to redeem and carry us home. That's what happened that day on the cross.

I leave you today with these words, words of a sermon preached for Easter around 170 AD and the text has survived all this time. A preacher named Melito of Sardis telling the story of a God who came down to save: "The Lord clothed himself with humanity, and with suffering for the sake of the sufferer, and with binding for the sake of the bound, and with judgment for the sake of the judged, and with burial for the sake of the entombed, and he rose from the dead and cried out aloud: 'Who now opposes me? Let him stand here before me. I have set the condemned free. I gave life to the dead. I raise up the buried. Who will stand against me now? It is I,' says the Christ, 'I am he who destroys death, and triumphs over the enemy, and crushes Hell, and binds the strong man, and bears my people off to the heavenly heights. It is I,' says the Christ. 'So come all families of peoples, adulterated by sin, and receive forgiveness of your sins. For I am your freedom. I am the Passover of salvation, I am the lamb slaughtered for you, I am your ransom, I am your life, I am your light, I am your salvation, I am your resurrection, I am your King. I shall raise you up by my right hand, I will lead you to the heights of heaven, there shall I show you the everlasting Father" (*On the Passion*, Melito of Sardis).

STUDY GUIDE

THE CROSS • "Power Flip"

Philippians 2:5-11

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Philippians 2:5-11. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) Reread verses 5-6. Paul describes the greatness of Jesus. He is God. He is a king. Yet verse six says that He didn't use this to His own advantage or glory. How does Jesus serve as an example for our relationships with one another?
- 2) How will our relationships change if we heed Paul's instructions here?
- 3) Reread verses 7-8. How do these verses (or this passage as a whole) inform our understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross?
- 4) Reread verses 9-11. What in these verses ring true to our lives today? What aspects of these verses are still "yet to come?"

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

First Pres will launch an "Alpha" course next week. Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith, designed for non-believers. It involves a meal, video content, and a small group discussion.

(Alpha will meet on Wednesday evenings from 6:30-8:30 in Café 225 from April 24-June 12. For more information, contact kfowler@firstprescos.org.)

Who could you invite to participate in Alpha?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pray that people who do not know Jesus would be open to an invitation to Alpha at First Pres. Pray that our Alpha team will create an environment in which people will feel safe and will be able to encounter Jesus.