

SCANDALOUS

The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus

D. A. CARSON

Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus

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Preface

Nothing is more central to the Bible than Jesus' death and resurrection. The entire Bible pivots on one weekend in Jerusalem about two thousand years ago. Attempts to make sense of the Bible that do not give prolonged thought to integrating the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are doomed to failure, at best exercises in irrelevance. Jesus' own followers did not expect him to be crucified; they certainly did not expect him to rise again. Yet after these events their thinking and attitudes were so transformed that they could see the sheer inevitability that Jesus would die on a cross and leave an empty tomb behind, and absolutely everything in their lives was changed.

However much the Bible insists on the historicity of these events, it never treats them as mere pieces of raw data—admittedly, rather surprising raw data—the meaning of which we are free to make up for ourselves. It is as important to know what these events mean as to know that they happened.

This little book is a modest attempt to summarize not only what happened but also what they mean—in short, to provide an introductory explanation of the cross and resurrection. I do this by unpacking what some of the earliest witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection wrote. The words of those witnesses are preserved in the Bible; the chapters in this book are explanations of five sections of the Bible that get at these questions.

Over the years I've had occasion to unpack many parts of the Bible that herald Jesus' death and resurrection. In December 2008 I gave these five addresses at a Resurgence conference in Mars Hill, Seattle. I am grateful to Mark Driscoll and the folks at the Henry Center for putting the conference together. And I am especially grateful to Andy Naselli for proofing this manuscript and compiling the indexes that make the written form of these talks a little more useful than they might otherwise have been.

—D. A. Carson

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abysmal weakness. But we see a deeper irony: the very weakness the mockers find amusing is Jesus' own way to power, the way to the resurrection, the way to functioning as the mighty temple of the living God. Although our own death to self-interest never functions with the same atoning significance as the death of Jesus, the same principle applies to us: in dying we live, in denying ourselves we find ourselves, as we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Here, then, is Matthew's second irony of the cross: the man who is utterly powerless—is powerful.

The Man Who Can't Save Himself Saves Others (Matt. 27:41–42)

The mockery continues in verses 41 and 42: “In the same way [that is, with similar mockery] the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can't save himself. He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.’”

What do we mean today by the verb *to save*? Ask someone at random on the streets of Seattle what the verb “to save” means, and what will be the response? Someone who is worried about his financial portfolio may reply, “‘Save’ is what you'd better do if you want money set aside for a comfortable retirement.” Ask a sports fan what the verb means, and he may reply, “‘Save’ is what a fine goalie does; he stops the ball from going into the net, and thus *saves* the point.” Ask computer techies what the verb means, and they will surely tell you that you jolly well better *save* your data by backing it up frequently, for otherwise when your computer crashes you may lose everything.

The mockers in verses 41 and 42 do not mean any of these things, of course. They are saying that apparently Jesus “saved” many other

people—he healed the sick, he exorcised demons, he fed the hungry; occasionally he even raised the dead—but now he could not “save” himself from execution. He could not be much of a savior after all. Thus even their formal affirmation that Jesus “saved” others is uttered with irony in a context that undermines his ability. This would-be savior is a disappointment and a failure, and the mockers enjoy their witty sneering.

But once again, the mockers speak better than they know. Matthew knows, and the readers know, and God knows, that in one profound sense if Jesus is to save others, he really cannot save himself.

We must begin with the way Matthew himself introduces the verb *to save*. It first shows up in Matthew’s first chapter. God tells Joseph that the baby in his fiancée’s womb has been engendered by the Holy Spirit. God further instructs him, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will *save* his people from their sins” (1:21). “Jesus” is the Greek form of “Joshua,” which, roughly, means “YHWH saves.” With this meaning so placarded at the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew gives his readers insight into Jesus the Messiah’s mission by reporting why God himself assigned this name: Jesus has come to save his people from their sins.

The entire Gospel must be read with this opening announcement in mind. If in Matthew 2 the infant Jesus in some ways recapitulates the descent of Israel into Egypt, it is part of his self-identity with them, for he came to save his people from their sins. If he experiences temptation at the hand of Satan himself, and repeatedly triumphs over it, it is because he must show *himself* removed from sin, however tempted, if he is to save his people from *their* sins. If in Matthew 5–7, in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives matchless and finely woven material on what life in the kingdom of heaven is like and how it fulfills Old Testament anticipation, it is, in part, because transformation of the lives

of sinful human beings is part and parcel of Jesus' mission: he came to save his people from their sins, as much the practice of sin as its guilt. If in chapters 8 and 9 Matthew reports a variety of symbol-laden miracles of healing and power, it is because the reversal of disease and the destruction of the demonic are inevitable components of saving his people from their sins. That is why Matthew 8:17 cites Isaiah 53:4: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases"—for his name is Jesus, $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ saves, and he came to save his people from their sins. If Matthew 10 reports a trainee mission, this is part of the preparation for the extension of Jesus' earthly ministry into the future, when the good news of the gospel, the gospel of the kingdom, will be preached in all the world, for Jesus came to save his people from their sins. In this fashion we could work our way through every chapter of Matthew's Gospel and learn the same lesson again and again: Jesus came to save his people from their sins.

Matthew knows this, the readers know this, God knows this. They know that Jesus is hanging on this damnable cross because he came to save his people from their sins. Even the words of institution at the Last Supper prepare us to understand the significance of Jesus' blood, shed on the cross: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*" (26:28). To use the language of Peter, Jesus died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God; to use Jesus' own language, he came to give his life a ransom for many.

When I was a boy I had a very perverse imagination, even more perverse, I suspect, than it is now. I sometimes liked to read a story, stop at some crucial point in the narrative, and wonder how the plot would unfold if certain crucial determining points were changed. My favorite biblical story for this doubtful exercise was the account of the crucifixion of Jesus. The mockers cry with irony and sarcasm, "He saved others, but he can't save himself. He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now

from the cross, and we will believe in him.” In my mind’s eye, I could see Jesus gathering his strength, and suddenly leaping down from the cross, healed, demanding clothes.

What would happen? How would the narrative now develop?

Would they believe in him?

At one level, of course, they certainly would: this would be a pretty remarkable and convincing display of power, and the mockers would be back-peddling pretty fast. But in the full Christian sense, would they believe in him? Of course not! To believe in Jesus in the Christian sense means not less than trusting him utterly as the One who has borne our sin in his own body on the tree, as the One whose life and death and resurrection, offered up in our place, has reconciled us to God. If Jesus had leapt off the cross, the mockers and other onlookers could *not* have believed in Jesus in *that* sense, because he would not have sacrificed himself for us, so there would be nothing to trust, except our futile and empty self-righteousness.

Suddenly the words of the mockers take on a new weight of meaning. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself.” The deeper irony is that, in a way they did not understand, they were speaking the truth. If he had saved himself, he could not have saved others; the only way he could save others was precisely by not saving himself. In the irony behind the irony that the mockers intended, they spoke the truth they themselves did not see. The man who can’t save himself—saves others.

One of the reasons they were so blind is that they thought in terms of merely physical restraints. When they said “he can’t save himself,” they meant that the nails held him there, the soldiers prevented any possibility of rescue, his powerlessness and weakness guaranteed his death. For them, the words “he can’t save himself” expressed a physical impos-

sibility. But those who know who Jesus is are fully aware that nails and soldiers cannot stand in the way of Emmanuel. The truth of the matter is that Jesus *could not* save himself, not because of any physical constraint, but because of a moral imperative. He came to do his Father's will, and he would not be deflected from it. The One who cries in anguish in the garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done," is under such a divine moral imperative from his heavenly Father that disobedience is finally unthinkable. It was not nails that held Jesus to that wretched cross; it was his unqualified resolution, out of love for his Father, to do his Father's will—and, within that framework, it was his love for sinners like me. He really could not save himself.

Perhaps part of our slowness to come to grips with this truth lies in the way the notion of moral imperative has dissipated in much recent Western thought. Did you see the film *Titanic* that was screened about a dozen years ago? The great ship is full of the richest people in the world, and, according to the film, as the ship sinks, the rich men start to scramble for the few and inadequate lifeboats, shoving aside the women and children in their desperate desire to live. British sailors draw handguns and fire into the air, crying "Stand back! Stand back! Women and children first!" In reality, of course, nothing like that happened. The universal testimony of the witnesses who survived the disaster is that the men hung back and urged the women and children into the lifeboats. John Jacob Astor was there, at the time the richest man on earth, the Bill Gates of 1912. He dragged his wife to a boat, shoved her on, and stepped back. Someone urged him to get in, too. He refused: the boats are too few, and must be for the women and children first. He stepped back, and drowned. The philanthropist Benjamin Guggenheim was present. He was traveling with his mistress, but when he perceived that it was unlikely he would survive, he told one of his servants, "Tell my

wife that Benjamin Guggenheim knows his duty”—and he hung back, and drowned. There is not a single report of some rich man displacing women and children in the mad rush for survival.

When the film was reviewed in the *New York Times*, the reviewer asked why the producer and director of the film had distorted history so flagrantly in this regard. The scene as they depicted it was implausible from the beginning. British sailors drawing handguns? Most British police officers do not carry handguns; British sailors certainly do not. So why this willful distortion of history? And then the reviewer answered his own question: if the producer and director had told the truth, he said, no one would have believed them.

I have seldom read a more damning indictment of the development of Western culture, especially Anglo-Saxon culture, in the last century. One hundred years ago, there remained in our culture enough residue of the Christian virtue of self-sacrifice for the sake of others, of the *moral imperative* that seeks the other's good at personal expense, that Christians and non-Christians alike thought it noble, if unremarkable, to choose death for the sake of others. A mere century later, such a course is judged so unbelievable that the history has to be distorted.

So we have reached a time when a powerful internal, moral, imperative is not easily understood. Small wonder, then, that the moral imperative under which Jesus himself operated has to be explained and justified.

Moreover, Christians today will understand that biblically authentic Christianity is never merely a matter of rules and regulations, of public liturgy and private morality. Biblical Christianity results in *transformed* men and women—men and women who, because of the power of the Spirit of God, enjoy regenerated natures. We *want* to please God, we *want* to be holy, we *want* to confess Jesus is Lord. In short, because of the grace secured by Christ's cross, we ourselves experience something of

a transforming moral imperative: the sins we once loved we learn to fear and hate, the obedience and holiness we once despised we now hunger for. God help us, we are woefully inconsistent in all this, but we have already tasted enough of the powers of the age to come that we know what a transforming moral imperative feels like in our lives, and we long for its perfection at the final triumph of Christ.

That is why we Christians will rejoice in this double irony: the man who can't save himself—saves others.

The Man Who Cries Out in Despair Trusts God (Matt. 27:43–51a)

Still sneering, the chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders cry mockingly, “He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (v. 43). Once again, their words are meant to convey sarcastic, ironic humor. When they say, “He trusts in God,” what they really mean, of course, is that his trust could not have been real, it could not have been valid, for he has been abandoned by God himself. Otherwise why would he be hanging from this wretched instrument of torture?

Those crucified with him join in the abuse (v. 44). Indeed, at first reading, Jesus' cry of desolation almost seems to warrant the bitter skepticism as to whether Jesus truly trusts in God: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?* “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (v. 46). Some contemporary commentators insist that these words demonstrate that at this point Jesus does in reality abandon his trust in God. The appropriate pastoral application, they conclude, is that if even Jesus can crack when he is subjected to enough pressure, then it is not too surprising if we sometimes crack, too. We should not be too hard on ourselves, they say,

“Do you believe? Or do you find yourself among the millions who begin to glimpse what the cross is about and dismiss the entire account as scandalous? A living-and-dying-and-living God? A God who stands over against us in wrath and who loves us anyway? A cross where punishment is meted out by God and borne by God? Scandalous!”

—From Chapter 2

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

