

CHRIST CRUCIFIED AND CURSED

Heidelberg Catechism Q39

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If I were to ask, 'What is the most used symbol of the Christian faith?' we would all very quickly say 'The Cross'. We see crosses all over the place. In church buildings. On church buildings. Printed in our books and pamphlets. Worn around necks. It is quite normal in our culture to wear a cross or see crosses. That's because of the influence of the church for centuries. But to have worn a cross in Jesus' day would have been hugely controversial. As the Apostle Paul writes (1 Corinthians 1:23) *"...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."* Put simply, it was regarded as extremely offensive and sheer lunacy. For the Jews, the cross carried the stigma of someone utterly cursed by God. For the Gentiles it was their harshest way of putting someone to death. As such it was reserved for criminals and slaves. It was against Roman law for a Roman citizen to be crucified. That's because the agony and humiliation of crucifixion was recognised as being too cruel. So how could death by crucifixion possibly benefit others. It was regarded as totally irrational. There was nothing noble about it. It was a complete riddle to them how Paul could write (Galatians 6:14) *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."* The people of Jesus' day would look at us very warily with all our crosses. The equivalent would be for us to wear a symbol of a hangman's noose, or an electric chair, or gas chamber or guillotine. How gruesome! Can you imagine singing 'In the hangman's noose I boast'?

Yes, the people of Jesus' time would think us very strange with our crosses. But for us it's a sign of great joy. It is a sign that Jesus has won the victory over the curse of sin and death. The symbol of the cross is an indication of what is central to our Christian faith. This is clearly brought out by Q39 of our confession. Here we continue our study of the words of the Apostles Creed about Jesus. Last week we looked at the words *"...suffered under Pontius Pilate"*. And now we go on to look at the words *"...was crucified, dead and buried."* The Catechism does not lump these three words about Christ's death together. It holds us up for a minute and says 'Now slow down here. Let's not miss anything. Jesus was crucified. Is there something in that we need to consider?' That is, *"Is it significant that he was crucified instead of dying some other way?"* And the reply is an emphatic 'Yes!' The reason for that can be argued as follows: 'Death by crucifixion was

accursed by God. Jesus died that way. Thus, I know he was cursed. And so, he shouldered the curse on me'. Now there are two main points in that answer. (1) We are under the curse. (2) Christ's crucifixion indicates he has now taken on that curse.

So, firstly, what does it mean when the Catechism refers to the *"...curse which lay on me"*? What is this about us being cursed? That sounds very heavy! And it is! The Catechism answer refers us to Galatians 3:10 where Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26: *"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law"*. In chapter 27 of Deuteronomy we have a list of curses, to which the people of Israel respond by saying "Amen". For example (Deuteronomy 27:20-26) *"Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" *"Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his father's wife, for he dishonors his father's bed."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" *"Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" ...*"Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" *"Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" *"Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out."* Then all the people shall say, "Amen!" What we have here was standard in the Old Testament time. A king would establish his authority over the people by reciting how he came to rule. He would set the laws and the people would commit themselves to obedience. They would invoke curses upon themselves for failure to obey. Following that pattern, God in Deuteronomy is confirming his covenant relationship with Israel. The word 'Deuteronomy' means 'the second law'. The next generation of Israelites, after 40 years in the desert, is about to enter the Promised Land. God sets the conditions. The people accept the conditions of the covenant. They acknowledge they are cursed if they fail the law of God.

Now the Apostle Paul in Galatians, is arguing against those who think salvation comes by obeying the law. Paul is quite upset with the Galatians because, they were not holding steady to the gospel of justification by faith. They were being duped by trouble makers with a Jewish background. They said, 'Salvation is by what you do, by doing all the law'. Paul reminds the Galatians (Galatians 3:10) *"All who rely on observing the law are under a curse"*. That's because the covenant requirements in Deuteronomy implied total obedience. And no one can do that. Think about it. Let's say we are really, I mean really, good people. We sin only three times a day. How many times is that in a year? Just over one thousand. After 50 years? 50,000. Can anyone say, they stand blameless before God? So, by the conditions set in Deuteronomy we are all cursed.

Now to many folks, that is heavy language. We are not used to the language of curses and blessings. Curses are thought of as swear words. Blessings are nice things. But curse and blessings are much deeper than that. When God blesses a people, when he turns his face toward his people and smiles on them, there is life and prosperity, wholeness and joy. But when God curses, when he turns his face away, there is death and despair and the eternity of being out of God's presence. On the day of atonement, the sin of the Israelites was placed on the scape goat. On that day the people were blessed with grace and peace. But the scape goat was sent away, never to return. It was cursed. It carried the guilt of the people. So, Paul argues salvation is not by the law. It never was. It is by faith, faith in Jesus. Faith in the Christ who became the scape goat. He says (Galatians 3:13) *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us, for it is written 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'"*.

Paul's argument here is closely followed by that of the Catechism. Which takes us to the second aspect of the answer: Christ's crucifixion indicates he has taken on the curse we deserve. Paul's quote, *"Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree"*, comes from Deuteronomy 21:22-23 *"If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance."* The reference here is not to capital punishment by hanging. It refers to the public exposure of a body hung up after death, either tied up or impaled. Death was usually by the sword or the traditional Jewish stoning. Now, what was the point of hanging up the body? If someone was already dead, why not just leave it? To understand we need to know that the Hebrew word for 'heavy' (cabod) also has to do with honour or dignity. We use the word that way too. When we refer to a 'weighty matter' we mean it's important. So, the Hebrew would say if someone loses his 'heaviness', they lose their importance. They are without honour. As long as one is standing with both feet on the ground, they have weight. They mean something. But if they are hanging between heaven and earth, they have no weight. They have no honour. No dignity is left. So, the hanging of the body on a tree was an intensification of the capital punishment. It was a gruesome act. It made it very clear the person was cursed by God. The person was detested. It was symbolic that the body was neither in heaven or on earth. It hung in between. It was unwanted. Rejected by God and rejected by the people. And so, Paul argues that Christ hanging on the cross, on the wood of the tree was cursed. He was rejected by the people. The Jewish crowd had clearly voiced their rejection. Pilate had condemned him to death. And God had also rejected him. As Jesus cried out (Matthew 27:46) *"My God... why have you forsaken me"*.

Now the significance of Christ's death by crucifixion is not just the symbolism of being cursed. The very way in which a person died when crucified is significant. For it was a very slow and painful death. There was the piercing of the hands and feet as the nails were driven through and fixed to the cross and then tied. There was the unnatural position with outstretched arms which made it very difficult to breathe. As they got weaker, they would slowly suffocate. There was the fever that set in when the wounds would get inflamed and the insects came. There was the congestion of the lungs and the inability of the heart to provide blood to all parts of the body. There was the pounding headaches and the burning sun which caused thirst and made all the suffering worse. All this Jesus had to bare naked. He lost all honour, not the slightest sliver of dignity was left. He was bereft of everything that made him a person. It was as Bernard of Clairvaux put it in the first verse of his hymn

'O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down.

Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, your only crown.

How pale you are with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!

How does your appearance languish, which once was bright as morn!

Such was deemed appropriate for one to suffer the curse, to experience the rejection of God. It would not have been appropriate if Jesus had been killed quickly and painlessly. Nor would it have been appropriate if Jesus had died of a heart attack or some disease. Nor even death by the Jewish stoning. Jesus' death had to be in such a way that it was his sacrifice. Some way in which he could take on and experience the curse of God. For his physical suffering was nothing in comparison to his rejection by God. Jesus taking on our curse was not something he got lumbered with. He took it on deliberately. Jesus was the great high priest who would give himself as the final sacrifice for sin. No more bloody sacrifices and scape goats. Jesus said, (Luke 22:19) *"This is my body broken for you..."* Jesus had to lay down his life in willing obedience. As he said (John 10:11) *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. No one takes it from me, I lay it down of my own accord."* Had Jesus died instantly or by some fatal illness he would not have given himself. Then he would not have suffered in his body and spirit the curse on humanity- the eternal rejection of God. He had to feel the curse in all its bitterness. He had to suffer all the thousands of years of human rebellion and disobedience that brought on the curse of God. Jesus hung there in obedience. He obeyed God completely. So, he was not under the curse for his own deeds. The people who said 'Amen' to the curses in Deuteronomy 27 cursed themselves by their disobedience. But Jesus fulfilled the covenant requirements. He who hung there voluntarily carried our curse. He shouldered that which lay on us. Let's not forget that the Christ who healed the sick, made the blind to see and lame to walk, who had command over the wind and sea, who raise the dead to life, could very easily have

come off the cross. It was not the nails or the rope that held Jesus to the cross. It was his love for us that held him there. He hung there and passed through the full experience of hell. He hung there and tasted every bitter drop from the cup of wrath. He tasted the horror of death. As the Catechism says, *"This death convinces me that he shouldered the curse that lay on me"*.

The cross is a powerful symbol. It is a strong word from God. It shows us what we really deserve. It shows us what we will receive if we reject the Christ. But it also shows us, stunningly, the grace of God. John Newton put it beautifully in his poem 'Thus, while his death my sin displays, in all its blackest hue, such is the mystery of grace, it seals my pardon too. With pleasing grief, and mournful joy, my spirit now is filled, that I should such a life destroy, yet live by him I killed!' God fulfilled the covenant requirements himself. He himself became the scape goat. God took his own curse. Through Emmanuel, God himself with us, the curse is removed. Jesus came to pay a debt he didn't owe because we owed a debt we couldn't pay. Now the blessing and love of God is on you who have come to God in faith. Now in Christ everything is changed. Now the Law is no longer a curse but the way to express our thanks. In joy and gratitude obey God and walking his ways. And the cross is no longer a sign of the curse. Now it is a sign of blessing and joy. Oh, the joyous ironies of God. How left field are his ways. Who would have thought it? Through the cross, of all things, Jesus has ushered in the kingdom and new life. No wonder we can now *"glory in the cross of Christ."*