
Passion Sunday: The Crucifixion

BOB HEERSPINK

It is the primary symbol of the Christian faith – the cross. Churches have special services to commemorate it, and no one questions that it is at the core of the Gospel. Christ’s journey and earthly mission come to their climax at the cross. As we spiritually find ourselves at the foot of the cross this season, we wonder: What did Christ’s death on the cross really accomplish? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

So Bob, we have been traveling through the Gospel of Matthew during these weeks and following the course of Jesus’ public ministry; and really, when we get down to the end of it, it is all packed into the last day or so of Jesus’ life – the ultimate meaning.

BOB HEERSPINK

These Gospels are not straight biographies. They spend so much time on the very last week of Jesus’ life, on the events that led up to his crucifixion.

DAVE BAST

And even the last day. I like to talk about the Christian version of *24*, you know that TV program; but really, if you think about it, from late Thursday afternoon in the upper room with the last supper until late Friday afternoon with the burial of Jesus’ body in a garden tomb, that is when it all happened; and as we unpack that story today we are very pleased to welcome a special guest, Dr. Paul Maier, who has been a professor of history at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for 50 years, and an expert in the ancient world of the Bible especially, is with us; and Paul, it is just a great pleasure to have you here on this special program.

PAUL MAIER

David and Bob, great to be with you.

BOB HEERSPINK

We are glad to have you with us, too.

DAVE BAST

So, let’s start with the cross. We’ve been introducing it as at the center; isn’t it rather odd that this instrument of torture should have become the great Christian symbol?

Paul Maier:

How true that is. It was a hideous form of death, you know. Cicero said it was the most atrocious of all the deaths. You couldn't inflict it on a Roman citizen. Jesus was not a Roman citizen, of course, so therefore, he would be susceptible to this particular terrible... advertising form of death was what it was. The Persian invented it. It was mediated to Rome through the Punics, the great Phoenician civilization...

DAVE BAST

The Carthaginians.

PAUL MAIER

The Carthaginians, exactly; and the Romans picked it up as a deterrent. The whole idea is you see a victim on a cross, and with a sign telling what the victim did, and therefore, it is supposed to deter any further crimes: Don't do what this miscreant did or you are going to get hung up like he is.

DAVE BAST

Sort of like public hangings used to be in the west.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, it actually was almost a form of entertainment or, well...

PAUL MAIER

A spectacle, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

It was a spectacle; and it wasn't done simply to effectively put people to death. It was time consuming. There were more effective ways of execution...

DAVE BAST

Quicker ways, you mean; but just unpack it for us. I mean, we have these images from Sunday school, some of us, you know, of Jesus tastefully clothed and carrying this big cross over his shoulder. It really wasn't like that historically, was it?

PAUL MAIER

No; actually, Jesus would be carrying only his crossbeam. The Romans called it a *patibulum*, on which he would be fastened by nailing or by ropes. Sometimes they used both. In Jesus' case, he was nailed, of course. Then this was put over kind of a mortise hole onto a vertical stake that remained standing at Golgotha at all times. They didn't use a fresh cross for every victim. Wood was expensive. There wasn't that much around, and so they would reuse these timbers, as a matter of fact.

DAVE BAST

So, the idea of him being nailed... the Gospels say that; but even that, it wasn't the way we often imagine it. For example, they wouldn't nail through the palm of the hand, is that true?

PAUL MAIER

Interestingly enough, there was a big theological debate over whether or not... a historical debate over whether or not Jesus was nailed. You know, the critics came along, like Bishop Pike, for example, known years ago, who claimed: No, the Gospel of John was wrong. You couldn't possibly have nailed anybody to the cross because human flesh is too fragile. The nail would work out in the webbing between the fingers or you would pull it over the cap of the head, and so forth; until the Bishop was proven wrong. After his death in 1971, they discovered in a suburb of Jerusalem... in a northeast suburb called Givat HaMivtar; and

bulldozers were doing a housing development and accidentally scraped open the side of a hill, in which there was a cave, now exposed with 36 ossuaries inside. Those are stone bone chests. Kind of a space-saving way to bury people in the First Century; and they lifted the lid off of one of these and the victim inside was... Jehohanan Ben Khagqol, was his name, and he was crucified by nailing... because they found a seven-inch spike still lodged in his heel bones; and the reason they saved the spike was simply because they encountered an olivewood knot as they were slamming it into the wood...

DAVE BAST

Into the upright.

PAUL MAIER

Into the upright, indeed; and the result was they couldn't pull it out. There was a fishhook at the end of that spike; and therefore, they had to have...

BOB HEERSPINK

So they buried the body with the spike...

PAUL MAIER

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

And there was the evidence that, indeed, people were actually nailed to the cross.

PAUL MAIER

Yes; some may have been tied. Some may have been tied and nailed. This victim was nailed, clearly.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, the length of time it took to crucify someone... You know, I have often heard comments that Jesus died unusually quickly...

PAUL MAIER

He did.

BOB HEERSPINK

For a crucifixion...

PAUL MAIER

That's right.

BOB HEERSPINK

That actually, death by crucifixion sometimes literally took days.

PAUL MAIER

Generally, the upper limit is about three days. Josephus, the First Century Jewish historian, for example, records that three of his friends were crucified and he was able to save one of them, and they had been on the cross for several days. Generally, this demonstrates that Jesus, of course, is on the cross from noon until 3:00 and then dies, and that is a very short period of time; showing only that there was tremendous maltreatment of Jesus on Thursday night already. He was scourged, as you well know, by Pilate on Friday morning; and therefore, he is losing blood. He can barely carry his own crossbeam...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, he needs assistance on the way.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly; and he faints several times, and for that reason he is next door to death anyway when he is on the cross. That is the reason he died so quickly.

DAVE BAST

I want to pick up on something you said, Paul, a moment or two ago about how we've got evidence from even archeology of the truthfulness of the Gospel account, because there have been many critics who have sort of slammed this story as an invention. This is a novel that the disciples wrote. They kind of made it up; and that is really not true, is it?

PAUL MAIER

No, David. In point of fact, there has been no episode in history in the past that is better documented than what happened on the original Good Friday; no question about it. For example, we have the governor, Pontius Pilate, he is known in all four Gospels. He is known in Roman historical record. The Roman historian, Tacitus, for example mentions Pilate. Josephus mentions him in terms of the Jewish tradition. He is very well known; in fact, a stone with his name... a cornerstone of a building that he erected in Caesarea was discovered in 1962 by an Italian archeological team. The stone says: To the people of Caesarea, Pontius Pilate has presented the *Tiberieum*, a building in honor of the Emperor Tiberius. So, hard evidence for Pilate.

DAVE BAST

Right.

PAUL MAIER

And on the other side, you have Joseph Caiaphas. Now, Joseph Caiaphas shows up.

DAVE BAST

The Jewish High Priest.

PAUL MAIER

The Jewish High Priest who indicted Jesus before Pilate on Good Friday. We have his name in all four Gospels; we have his name in Josephus; in the Rabbinic Traditions he shows up; and his bones have been discovered – the very bones of the first biblical personality ever to come to life surfaced in November 1990. It was not announced until 1992, and I don't know why the word hasn't gotten out. I could be talking to a pastoral conference and I will say: Does anybody know the identity of the first bones that have been discovered of biblical nature? And about one percent of the audience knows about that. I think it is terribly important. So, here you have both sides of the bar: The judge and the chief prosecutor on Good Friday – absolutely historical – and with the hard archeological evidence from the ancient world proving it with a smoking gun from the past.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, Paul, here is this story, and it is so powerful. It is historical; and the amazing thing is, the Church has said this is what we really have to focus on in terms of understanding Jesus. We have to focus on his cross – his death.

DAVE BAST

You know, Bob, that has always struck me, too; and I wonder, did the cross come in as a symbol for Christians right from the start? Was that a little bit later? I have always wondered.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, you think of the fish as the sign...

DAVE BAST

Yes, the fish was a Christian symbol early on.

BOB HEERSPINK

That you see in the early Church.

DAVE BAST

But what about the cross?

PAUL MAIER

Interestingly enough, the cross shows up just as early as the fish does. I was always taught that the fish, you know, the *ichthys* – the Greek word is an acrostic for Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Savior; but the cross is there early also. How do we know? In August of 79 AD Mount Vesuvius blew its top and immortalized in lava the port town of Herculaneum, and then the ashes covered Pompey, as you well know. Well, Herculaneum... when they were digging down with pneumatic drills, you know, to get down there – it is so difficult – it is rock, really; they did find a house where upstairs there was a worship center – an oratory – where there was an impression of exactly the kind of Christian cross we see in churches today on the wall. When the lava started coming, the family quickly grabbed the metal cross out of there, but the imprint is there; and so, as of 79 AD, which is early, we have the Christian cross as a symbol as well.

DAVE BAST

In a church?

PAUL MAIER

No, but it was a room used as a...

DAVE BAST

A room used for worship; essentially a church.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, this is incredible that at the same time crucifixions were still going on in the First Century, the Church was claiming the cross as a symbol of its faith.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly, exactly. You know, it is interesting why it should. The equivalent would be, instead of a little gold cross on your lapel, how about a hangman's noose?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Or an electric chair.

PAUL MAIER

Right, exactly. How many of those do you see?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. You would think they would have hushed it up, you know. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, it is foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews. I mean, this caused problems for them. You would think they would kind of soft-pedal it.

PAUL MAIER

You know, David, I think it is a possibility that it was the enemies of Christianity that first said: You foolish people; you believe in a crucified criminal; or something like that; and yes, then they took that boldly as their symbol. This is how, indeed, so many religious bodies get their names: Methodist – John Wesley...

DAVE BAST

Yes, it was mockery at first, right.

PAUL MAIER

It was mockery...

DAVE BAST

Look at the *Methodies*...

PAUL MAIER

The Quakers – the Quakers...

DAVE BAST

They are trembling, right.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly, yes.

DAVE BAST

Even the Christians in Antioch – the *Christianoi* – they are always talking about Christ...

PAUL MAIER

These Christers – Christers...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

What we have established now is that the crucifixion has historical backing; it happened; it is factual; but then that whole area that we really have to explore a little more – the meaning of it; because the Church claimed a meaning for the cross that the rest of the world didn't understand; and that is what we really have to come back to when we continue our conversation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, Bob; not just *that* it happened; we can believe that on historical grounds; but *why* it happened from God's point of view. So, let's explore that with Dr. Paul Maier when we come back after this break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Along with Bob Heerspink, I am Dave Bast, and today we are also joined by special guest, Dr. Paul Maier, Professor of History at Western Michigan University. We are talking about the crucifixion of Jesus, and not only how it happened, *that* it happened, but *why* it happened. To do that, we want to look at the meaning of the cross, really the heart of the Christian faith.

BOB HEERSPINK

And really, scripture gives us insight into the meaning of the cross through Christ's own words. Jesus on Calvary really interpreted for us what the cross was about, and he did it in really the only word from the cross that we find in the Gospel of Matthew; and let me just share a few verses from Matthew 27:

⁴⁵From noon until three in the afternoon, darkness came over all the land. ⁴⁶About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. ⁴⁹The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him." ⁵⁰And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

DAVE BAST

So, that is a haunting cry, Paul. What can you tell us about even the language that Jesus uses?

PAUL MAIER

That is very interesting. There you have a transliteration of the sounds that came from Jesus' mouth... probably Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani would be how it would sound, proving that Jesus was using Aramaic at the time rather than Hebrew, and this was the common, everyday commercial language in Israel at that time; no question about that.

DAVE BAST

So Hebrew was used just for worship and the reading of the scripture.

PAUL MAIER

On the Sabbath worship reading of scripture, indeed. It was too sacred a language really to use in the marketplace; and Mark's Gospel also tells us about raising the daughter of Jairus, *talitha koum*...

DAVE BAST

Little girl, get up.

PAUL MAIER

Little girl, get up, yes. Or to cure the deaf person: *ephratha*; that is Aramaic, and so clearly...

BOB HEERSPINK

But the crowd really misinterprets the cry. They are saying he is calling Elijah when actually he is calling on God.

PAUL MAIER

On God, indeed, *Eloi*. By the way, the darkness that you referred to in the reading; this, believe it or not, can be authenticated by secular evidence. There was a Greek writer of mysteries; kind of an ancient version of Ripley, as in *Believe It or Not* fame. He wrote a book called *Natural Questions*. He came from Caria in southwestern Asia Minor, and he reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad – that is how the Greeks counted their years – there was a darkness so intense that you could see stars in the daytime; and earthquake felled many of the buildings in Nicaea. Now, interestingly enough, the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad turns out to be 33 AD, and the fourth month is April, and according to all of my calculations, the best date for Good Friday is the 3rd of April, 33 AD. I came to that date long before I discovered Phlegon, but nevertheless, you have a beautiful confirmation of what happened.

DAVE BAST

From a Greek writer...

PAUL MAIER

From a Greek writer.

DAVE BAST

That there was an unearthly darkness on that day.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Wow. That really is awesome. Getting back to the meaning of Jesus' words, okay? He is speaking in Aramaic. It has often been noted that he is quoting Psalm 22, the first verse, but a lot of people have tried to downplay the significance of what he says.

PAUL MAIER

Well indeed. It is a very difficult saying. As a matter of fact, Martin Luther said that is the most difficult verse in the Bible. We understand it theologically that Jesus is not speaking as the second person of the Trinity, he is speaking from his human nature alone; a human nature that could actually die and rise again; and in this case, God cannot die, but the human side of Jesus did, you see, and for that reason, he is being separated from the divine nature there in the process.

BOB HEERSPINK

So it is not just an emotional experience that Jesus is going through here. I mean, this is a real separation. There is mystery here, obviously...

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely.

BOB HEERSPINK

As to how this can happen.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Some people have tried to say even it is a confession of faith because that psalm, Psalm 22, ends on a note of faith, but it has always struck me as being odd that if Jesus means to confess his trust and faith in God, that he quotes the beginning of forsakenness and not the end, the part that is more...

PAUL MAIER

Don't forget that he could have quoted more, too; and Matthew records only that at the time.

DAVE BAST

I don't think we have the right to psychologize Jesus and say: Well, he is mistaken about this. God hasn't really left him or forsaken him or...

PAUL MAIER

Exactly, exactly.

DAVE BAST

Or to turn the words around and say they mean the opposite of what they...

PAUL MAIER

Yes, exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

But the fact that he calls out in the words of scripture strikes me that still, in his own way, he is calling out to God. I mean, even in his forsakenness, which is real, it is the words of scripture that come to his mouth. It is scripture that he has quoted time and time again in his ministry, and I think that is significant.

DAVE BAST

Yes... it is still “My God” that he says; but the Christian faith has this line in the Creed: He descended into hell... That has always struck me as being kind of the shakiest biblically. Can you unpack a little bit about what the early Christians thought they were saying there?

PAUL MAIER

Actually, that is one clause in the Creed that really could be dropped with no difficulty. I think what happened was the Christians, especially in southern Gaul, or France we call it today, who devised the Apostles’ Creed, were getting a little bit too geometric about this. You notice how the Creed works. You have God coming down in the form of a man, born of a virgin, suffers, dies and before he rose again, even worse, let’s go down to the abode of Hades. In this case, it is not to suffer. It is a triumphant descent down to hell, in which he announces, of course, the liberty of the captives there; but it is, I think, a little bit too graphed, you might say, down and then up; and therefore, an unnecessary clause that the Church in some ecumenical council might decide to drop one day.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and there are Christians who would say this isn’t really a literal descent into hell; this is really describing more the forsakenness of Christ on Calvary.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is really what is at the essence here.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I was just in an ancient Greek church, and they had a fabulous fresco there titled: *Anastasis*, which is Greek for resurrection; but it is really what in the West they call the *harrowing of hell*, and it shows Jesus sort of stomping on the gates of hell and there are broken chains and he is taking Adam and Eve by the hand and lifting them up, because this is the moment, according to the Greek Church – the Eastern Church – when Jesus, in between the crucifixion and resurrection, sort of freed the captives of the Old Testament...

PAUL MAIER

Good theology – good theology, yes.

DAVE BAST

But biblically, did it happen?

PAUL MAIER

Again, it is of lesser importance than the other tremendous phrases that we agree on in the Apostles’ Creed. You will notice, the Nicene Creed did not repeat that later on, the larger one.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and getting back to this God-forsaken God-man hanging from the cross in the darkness between noon and three, he really did experience and suffer a form of hell for us. I think that is the heart of what at

least the Reformers understood to be the meaning of the cross.

PAUL MAIER

Yes; the substitutionary atonement. You have a perfect God who demands perfection and is not going to be giving idle commandments. They had to be fulfilled. Who is going to do it? Human beings couldn't do it. Only God could fulfill his own demands, and he did it in Jesus Christ; so you have the paradox of this innocent person who deserved no suffering whatever instead reciprocally getting the suffering that we should have endured. It is something that is so sublime no human being could ever have invented this particular procedure. We logical Western types would say: Well, no, God. Try another method. Try something else. As a matter of fact, even Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane was wondering about this particular method of salvation: God, isn't there some other way? We will never be able to give you a good, logical explanation as to why God had to do this in Christ. Someday we will know, but I think it is kind of the flaming sword standing in the way of human reason saying: Thus far, no further. Someday you will understand. God is so dimensionally different and above us – and in us – but nevertheless, above us that if, well, I like the words of St. Augustine: *Credo ut absurdum est* – I believe because it is absurd.*

DAVE BAST

Yes, try that one on for size. Yes, well, you know, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” Don't you think, if it were possible, the Father would have answered that prayer? But he didn't.

PAUL MAIER

It was, “Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” Again, Jesus speaking only according to his human nature there. You know, otherwise Arius was right, that Jesus was less than the Father; but we are talking only about his human nature.

BOB HEERSPINK

But this is what the Church staked its life on. This is why, for me, the cross becomes such a focal point of the Gospels and in the life of the early Church. They got it. They understood what the cross was at its heart, at its meaning.

PAUL MAIER

I would agree, except I would say both the cross and the resurrection.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's talk about that next week. Meanwhile, thank you, Dr. Paul Maier, for joining us on this *Groundwork* program, and thanks to you also, our listeners. We would like to hear what you think about what you have been hearing on the program. So, why don't you contact us? Just go online to groundworkonline.com and let us know what you are thinking.

***Note:** Dr. Maier attributes this phrase to St. Augustine, however, it also is commonly attributed to Tertullian. *Credo quia absurdum* is a Latin phrase that means “I believe because it is absurd.” It is a paraphrase of a statement in Tertullian's work *De Carne Christi*, “prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est”, which can be translated: “it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd”.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/passion-sunday-the-crucifixion>

Printed on April 24, 2025