

What is the most common religious symbol in the world? In our part of the world, the most common religious symbol is the cross. You see the cross on churches. You see the cross in jewelry. Sports figures and celebrities wear crosses. A couple of weeks ago, Trenton Robinson, who is looking to be drafted into the NFL was one our judges for the Dunk Competition at our Men's Basketball All Star game. Trenton had a cross around his neck. What did that cross mean to Trenton?

It wasn't always such a popular symbol. During the days of Jesus, the cross was a symbol of shame and embarrassment, a symbol of warning and terror. The Roman empire used the cross as a means of execution. A pole would be sunk into the ground, and if you were sentenced to crucifixion, you would be fastened to a crossbar and hung onto that pole. The cross was only reserved for slaves and robbers and assassins and rebels. As a general rule, Roman citizens wouldn't be executed on a cross, because it was too shameful of a way to die.

The cross was a common site in the early first century. Caesar Augustus bragged about capturing 20,000 runaway slaves – whichever ones were not claimed were crucified. 6000 slaves involved in a rebellion were all crucified at once on the road leading to Rome. 2000 people in Palestine were crucified for their rebellion. For a Jew, the cross represented the worst way to die. To be crucified, in the eyes of a Jew, meant that you have been cursed by God. If you lived in the early first century, the cross would be a symbol of shame and terror for you.

Initially, the cross was not a symbol in the Christian church – it was forbidden by early church leaders to be pictured in religious art. Things changed when the Roman emperor Constantine took over. He wasn't really interested in the person of Jesus Christ, and, in his opinion, the cross as an embarrassing symbol. But, for some reason, he adopted the symbol as a “good luck charm” and symbol of triumph, and placed the symbol of the cross on the shields of his soldiers.

The cross was not common in religious art until the fourth century, when everyone who had ever seen a live crucifixion had died. What does the cross symbolize to you? For one man in the early first century, the cross began as a symbol of death, but became a symbol of life and forgiveness and relief, as we will see today.

Jesus was led out to be crucified, and two criminals were led out with him. When they came to a place called “the Skull,” the Roman soldiers crucified Jesus, with one criminal on his left, and one on his right. Here a prophecy is fulfilled: Isaiah had foretold that Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors. When Jesus was hung on the cross, he was lowered to the level of a criminal. He was brought down to the same level as those other two criminals, and everyone else who had ever been crucified.

As Jesus hung from that cross of Calvary, struggling for every breath to breathe, he spoke words. On this Good Friday, we would like to look at some particular words he spoke, just before his death, the words, “It is finished.”

In the original language that the Bible was written, “It is finished” is actually one word: “tetelestai.” “Tetelestai” was a word that was connected to the idea of paying off a debt. Archeologists have uncovered many scraps of paper and papyrus that were first century bills, or

bank notes. And at the bottom, if that bill was paid or that debt was paid off, you would find the word “tetelestai,” “it is finished.”

When Jesus said, “tetelestai” right before he died, some of the people at the foot of the cross heard it. The soldiers would have heard it. And the picture that would have popped into their heads would have been the idea that something has been paid in full, some debt has been taken care of.

The debt that Jesus was referring to was that debt that the world had owed to God. Do you realize that when you are born, you are already in debt? Not financially, but spiritually. People are conceived and born into spiritual debt, because people are conceived and born into sin. When you come into this world, you are born with a sinful nature, which means that spiritually, you are already “in the red.” And then, as you live your life, you commit more and more and more sins – you do things you’re not supposed to, you say things you’re not supposed to say, and you think things that you really shouldn’t be thinking. All these things are sins, and the more you sin, the more debt you pile up.

“You owe me,” God says. “You owe me, because of all your sins.” And when we ask God, “What do we owe you? How do we pay off this debt of sin that we have piled up in our lives?” God says, “There is only one way. The wages of sin is death. You’re going to have to die, not just physically, but eternally. In order for you to pay for all the sins you’ve committed in your life, you’re going to have to go to hell, and suffer there for eternity. Then, your debt to me will be paid.”

That is what you and I owe to God because of our sins. But God didn’t want you to have to pay that debt. He didn’t want to lose you for an eternity. You are a precious soul to God, a precious human being, and God loves you too much to just dismiss you as a sinner and send you away. But someone has to pay off that debt – God can’t just sweep all that sin under the carpet. Someone has to pay for it.

That’s what Jesus was doing on that cross. Many say that Jesus died on that cross to give us an example of how to be humble, how to suffer for something you think is right. That’s not why he was on that cross. He was there to pay off that debt that you and I and the rest of the world owed to God. That was his goal. From the moment he was born, throughout his life, throughout his ministry, through that trial, through that mocking and scourging and rejection and pain – through it all, Jesus always had his eyes set on that one goal.

And that one goal was to pay off that debt. The entire world owed to God an eternity’s worth of suffering. And Jesus agreed to step forward, as your substitute, and pay off that debt for you. That’s why he was dying on that cross. That’s why he said, “My God my God, why have you forsaken me.” He was going through the suffering that you and I owe to God, because of our sin.

But then it was over. He had done it. The suffering was completed. The punishment was taken care of. Your debt was paid. And that’s why Jesus said, “tetelestai,” or “it is finished.” You never have to wonder, “What do I owe God? How do I pay for the sins I’ve committed in my life?” You never have to worry about that – Jesus paid for all those sins when he hung on the

cross. “Is there anything left for me to do, to make myself right with God?” The answer is no. Everything has been finished. Every ounce of suffering that we owe God – it’s all been paid in full. You are right with God. There’s nothing that stands between you and God. He loves he, he forgives you, and he has a place for you in heaven. And it’s all because of Jesus, who paid our debt in full. As the hymn writer says, 5) What language shall I borrow To thank you, dearest Friend, For this, your dying sorrow, Your pity without end? Oh, make me yours forever, And keep me strong and true; Lord, let me never, - never - Outlive my love for you.