

For us and our salvation

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[0 : 00] Today we've reached a section in the creed which says, For us and for our salvation. And just like we've been doing every week in this series, we're now going to stand and we're going to recite just the first half again of the Nicene Creed up to the section which we are considering today.

So please stand with me as we get ready to say the Nicene Creed together. 1, 2, 3.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of the same essence as the Father.

Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human.

He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. Thank you. Please take a seat. There is also a sermon outline in your bulletin, if that might help you to follow along as well.

[1 : 32] Otherwise, let's go to the Lord in prayer. Let's pray. Father, as I open up the scriptures again today, I pray that you would speak clearly and powerfully.

Help me to be faithful to your word. Help me to bring out again the glory of the cross. And help me to keep on just helping us, Lord, to lift our eyes that we might proclaim you as worthy, as deserving of all honor and glory and praise.

Pray all this in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen. Now, if you were to visit the house that my wife grew up in, you would find a trophy cabinet in the living room.

Inside are medals and trophies from her school days. Medals for winning quizzes. Trophies for winning debate competitions.

But why do these things exist? Because trophies make victories visible. They put achievement on display. They showcase glory.

[2 : 35] That's what trophies are for. Right? And that has always been the case. Back in ancient Rome, if a military general won a significant victory, the Roman Senate would reward them.

They might grant him a grand public ceremony and parade through the city. And as he processed through the city, the spoils of war would be put on display for everyone to see.

In a sense, they function as one giant trophy. They proclaim to everyone, victory has been won. So no wonder Christianity must have seemed deeply shocking to the ancient world.

Because at the very center of our faith lies the cross. Now, to us, this might not feel shocking at all, for nowadays the cross is an image that has sadly been sanitized.

No different from the arches of McDonald's or the logo of Apple. But this was the ultimate symbol, not of victory, but of defeat.

[3 : 51] Not of glory, but of shame. After all, what is the cross? It is an instrument of torture.

It is designed to maximize your pain as nails are driven through your dense nerve centers. Sending continuous lightning-like pain shooting through your limbs.

And it is also designed to maximize your shame as you are stripped not only of your clothing, but of your dignity. You are exposed not just to the insects swarming around your open wounds, but also to the mocking gazes of the public.

No wonder the great Roman orator, Cicero, famously declared, the very word cross should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears.

For what showcases your humiliation and disgrace more than the cross? And yet this, this of all things, is what God has chosen to display as his victory trophy.

[5 : 12] In fact, that's exactly what Athanasius, the chief architect of Nicene theology, called the cross. Reflecting on Christ's death, he wrote this, that ignominious death which they taught to inflict, this was the trophy of his victory over death.

The most shameful object in the Roman world, the very thing Cicero said a Roman shouldn't even think about, according to Athanasius, is God's very trophy.

So the cross is not just an obstacle that God had to overcome on his way to victory. It is the victory. But how can that be?

How can an instrument of execution be a trophy of conquest? How can the public humiliation become a triumph? What kind of king conquers by being crucified?

That's what we'll be exploring today as we consider the Creed's words. For us and for our salvation, he was crucified.

[6 : 25] And we'll do it mainly through one of the most dramatic scenes in all of scripture, Revelation chapter 5. And we're going to look at this chapter in three scenes.

The cosmic crisis, the crucified conqueror, and the celestial chorus. So firstly, the cosmic crisis. Let me set the scene. At the beginning of chapter 4, the apostle John is granted a breathtaking vision of heaven. Jesus shows him the very throne room of God, where the maker of heaven and earth rules.

And now, in 5 verse 1, he sees in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

So John notices a scroll firmly held in the Lord's grip. And it's got writing on both sides. That's pretty unusual.

[7 : 31] Usually there's writing only on the inside. So that suggests this scroll is packed to the brim with content. But there's a problem.

This scroll is sealed completely with seven seals. And verses 2 and 3 tells us no one has been able to open it. Not Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar.

Not the Prophet Muhammad or Confucius or Buddha. Not even Moses or Elijah. In fact, even the mighty angel of verse 2 cannot open it.

It requires someone truly worthy. And if no one can be found, God's plans cannot move forward. Nothing can move. Why not? Let me put it this way. Back in the ancient world, a will was completely useless until the seals were broken and someone actually executed it.

[8 : 39] And that's what this scroll basically is. It is God's will. It's his plans for the universe. His blueprint for the world. It is his manifesto for judging and banishing evil.

Putting right everything that has gone wrong. And it needs to be unsealed. Not just so that its contents can be read, but so that it can be executed.

But who alone has the authorization to do so? Who alone can not only open and read this scroll, but has the authority to execute its contents?

Who can make sure God's good purposes will come to pass? The devastating answer in verse 3 is no one.

Absolutely no one. God's good purposes for the world appears permanently! Stored! So no wonder verse 4, John weeps and weeps.

[9 : 49] You see, here is the paradox of humanity. On the one hand, are we not creatures that are absolutely worthy of admiration?

We can build everything from spaceships to microchips. We can write some of the most moving poetry and paint some of the most beautiful pictures. We can love with a capacity that exceeds all other animals here on earth.

But on the other hand, are we not also the most unworthy? For we are capable also of building nuclear bombs and indeed invent the instrument of torture that is the cross.

We can wound others deeply with our words and create deep fake pornographic images. We can hate others with a ferocity that goes deeper than we could ever imagine.

And that is why John weeps. From the perspective of God's throne room, that is the cosmic crisis we face.

[11 : 05] No one can open this to you. And according to God, that crisis has a two-fold nature.

Now, Revelation 5 doesn't spell it out and neither does the creed because they assume we already know.

But I wouldn't assume that, so let me just turn to another portion of scripture that does spell it out. So come with me for a moment to Ephesians chapter 2 verses 1 to 3 and let me show you the depth of our crisis.

Firstly, we are in bondage. According to Ephesians 2 verse 2, we followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. In other words, the Bible is saying there is an adversary, the devil, and we are under his sway. Now, don't you sometimes feel that when you look at the world?

Look at how so many of us can find ourselves addicted to everything from alcohol to social media. Look at how entire countries can seem to be caught in cycles of destruction we can't break.

[12 : 31] Look at how systemic evil sometimes takes on a life of its own, transcending any single individual. And doesn't it feel at times as if humanity is captive to something more powerful than ourselves?

That is because it is true. The devil really does exist and he loves to encourage sin and wickedness in our midst.

But Ephesians 2 makes sure not to stop there because we are not just helpless captives. For secondly, we are guilty and deserving of punishment.

As Paul goes on to say in verse 3, we also gratified the cravings of our flesh and followed its desires and thoughts. So in one sense we are enslaved, yes, but in another sense we are willing slaves.

We do what we should not do and we don't do what we should do. And that's why Paul concludes verse 3 again that we were by nature deserving of wrath.

[13 : 54] We have done wrong. So God must punish us. That is the cosmic crisis. We are unworthy sinners who have sold ourselves into slavery and deserve to be judged.

But perhaps you are thinking why can't God just overlook our sin and forgive? Isn't he supposed to be a loving and forgiving God? But we all know a just judge must punish unjust people.

If a judge let someone who stole billions from 1MDB or someone who committed murder walk free, just like that, we wouldn't call him merciful, we would call him corrupt.

And God is loving and just. And God isn't only just, he is also truthful.

So if God says, you will die if you sin, and that is exactly what you do, his very trustworthiness requires him to follow through.

[15 : 12] Otherwise, he would simply be a liar. That is exactly what Athanasius understood. He wrote, it would of course have been unthinkable that God should go back upon his word and that man, having transgressed, should not die.

And that is why back in Revelation chapter 5, God cannot just open the seal by brute power. If he does so, then yes, he might prove that he is the biggest and strongest being in the universe, but he would not have proven he is the righteous king whose rule is perfectly just.

He might defeat the devil simply by being stronger, but he will not defeat it in a way that upholds his justice and righteousness. That's why we need someone who can both break the power of the captor and uphold the sentence of the judge.

Otherwise, we will be left with either a God who is powerful but not just, or a God who is just but not powerful.

But the question is, who? we certainly can't do it on our own. And that's why John weeps so deeply, because he cannot imagine anyone equal to that task.

[16 : 51] But thankfully, that is just the opening scene. Come back with me to Revelation 5 and let's move on to scene 2. The crucified conqueror, the crucified conqueror.

You see, as John weeps, you probably could have heard a pin drop. All is quiet. But now, a word comes in verse 5 that breaks the silence.

Then one of the elders said to me, do not weep. See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed.

He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals. So there is someone worthy after all. And notice how this person is described.

First off, he is the lion of Judah. So immediately we think, oh, the king of the jungle. And when we realize that title actually comes from Genesis 49, and we're told there that the nations will obey such a figure, we think, well, of course.

[18 : 06] Because when we think of lions, we think of strength, we think of an overpowering force of someone who can dominate. And then we see that this person is also called the root of David,

which is also an Old Testament title from Isaiah 11.

And if we were to turn there, we're told that this is a king, and such a king will slay the wicked and bring justice to God's people, he will win.

And we get even more excited. Indeed, did you notice in verse 5, this lion of Judah and root of David has triumphed or conquered, depending on your translation?

Either way, it is past tense. In other words, it's not just that he will win, he has already won. He's already proven himself worthy.

So, everything seems to be preparing us for a display of irresistible power. Indeed, does the Nicene Creed not itself prepare for such a moment?

[19 : 24] after all, last week, it described Jesus as true God from true God and being of the same essence as the Father.

So, this is God himself entering the arena. And surely, there is no one more powerful than that. So, this is the moment we've been waiting for.

This is the answer to John's tears. And then, the camera are pants around. And you and I go, eh? Course, verse 6, then I saw a lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.

Suddenly, there is silence again. Because, wait a minute, did I mishear the elder? He said, lion, right? But all I'm seeing now is a lamb, and even more confusingly, a slain lamb.

[20 : 32] Just what is going on? I mean, if you're asked to think of mighty and formidable animals, a lamb is not what comes to mind. And a slain lamb, even more so.

I mean, it's dead, isn't it? In fact, the only thing a slain lamb would have conjured up in John's mind would have been sacrifice. Because that would be the context in which John would most often have encountered such an animal.

And yet, the strange thing about this slain lamb, of course, is that it isn't actually dead. It's actually standing. Indeed, the fact that it has seven horns and seven eyes suggests he has fullness of power and knowledge.

For this is what Revelation 5 wants to communicate to us. Victory has been won through sacrifice. He is indeed the lion, but the lion must be understood paradoxically as a lamb as well.

Or as the early church father, Augustine, puts it, he endured death as a lamb, it should be on the screen, he devoured it as a lion.

[21 : 59] He is the lamb and the lion because in being slain, he slew death. In other words, he is the crucified conqueror.

Indeed, does the Nicene Creed not also narrate this paradox? After telling us who Jesus is, the Lord, true God from true God, the one through whom all things were made, it goes on to show us this stunning reversal.

For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human.

he was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried. So, notice how in every line, it's as if Jesus, starting from up there, is taking one step further down.

He became incarnate, one step down, he suffered, yet another step down, he was crucified, another step down, and he was buried all the way down.

[23 : 19] This is historical fact, as the mention of Pontius Pilate in the Creed makes clear. The lion is becoming the lamb.

But this now raises the question, how does a slain lamb conquer? How does this sacrifice constitute victory?

Well, remember the two-fold problem we identified earlier? We said we needed someone who can both break the power of the captor and uphold the sentence of the judge.

And what I want to show you now is that the cross does both. And it does both in a single act. Let me explain.

And to do that, we need to go first to Isaiah 53. You see, when John sees a lamb looking as if it had been slain, he is seeing an image that echoes two things from the Old Testament.

[24 : 28] One is the Passover lamb from Exodus. the lamb whose blood caused the angel of death to pass over God's people and set them free from slavery in Egypt.

And the other is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who is described as being like a lamb led to the slaughter. Both images, liberation, and sacrifice are fused together in the lamb of Revelation 5.

But it is Isaiah 53 that most clearly explains how this sacrifice works. And so what I want you to do is notice the extraordinary parallelism in the verse that I'm about to read, because the structure of the language itself tells you what is going on.

So Isaiah 53 verse 5, which is on the screen, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Now do you see the pattern? He gets pierced, we get forgiven. He gets crushed, we get peace. He bears the punishment, we get reconciled.

[25 : 57] He gets the wounds, we get healing. There is a swap running through every single line. what belongs to us.

The guilt, the punishment, the crushing goes to him. And what belongs to him? The peace, the healing, the wholeness comes to us.

In other words, there is a substitution going on. There is a deliberate two-way exchange. That's what the creed means when it says he was crucified for us.

Not just for our benefit, but in our place. He bore the sentence that was ours to bear, not as an unwilling third party, but as our willing representative.

In other words, God does not simply overlook our guilt. Our sin is judged, justice is done, but it is done in the person of our substitute, Jesus.

[27 : 16] The punishment falls on him so that peace can come to us. But what else does this substitution achieve?

Paul writes, when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal inductedness, which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Now, did you notice the flow of Paul's argument?

In verse 14, Jesus canceled the record of death. He nailed it to the cross. And that is the substitution we just saw in Isaiah 53.

[28 : 23] the lamb bearing the sentence that was ours. Then look at verse 15. He disarmed the rulers and authorities.

He triumphed over them. Now, that's victory. That's the lion defeating the enemy. But here is the crucial thing.

Verse 15 flows from verse 14. The disarming happens because the debt has been canceled. The victory is caused by the substitution.

But why? Why does cancelling our debt disarm Satan? Because think about it. What is Satan's greatest weapon against you?

It is not illness. it is not persecution. It is not even death itself. At least not death in the way we normally think about it. Satan's greatest weapon is accusation.

[29 : 34] After all, what does Satan literally mean? It means the accuser. That's his job description. He stands in the court of heaven and he points at you and he says guilty.

And the thing is he is right. We are guilty. We have rebelled. We have no answer. And if he is right, we are eternally condemned.

That's why this weapon is so powerful. But here is what the cross does. When Christ dies as our substitute, the record of debt is cancelled, it is nailed to the cross, it is paid in full, and certainly the accuser has nothing to say.

It's as if Satan marches into the courtroom ready for an easy conviction. He's got the case files, he's got the evidence, but when he gets there, the judge says the debt has already been paid, the sentence has already been served, case dismissed.

And Satan is left standing there disarmed. His weapons have been taken from him. Not by force, but by justice.

[31 : 04] The ground on which he stood, our guilt, has been pulled out from under his feet. And that's why one old theologian could write, sin was the ground of Satan's dominion, the sphere of his power, and the secret of his strength.

And no sooner was the guilt lying on us extinguished, than his throne was undermined. Or as Revelation 12 puts it, the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down.

They conquered him by the blood of the lamb. And that, my brothers and sisters, is why Athanasius caught the cross a victory trophy.

That is why Jesus alone is worthy to open the scroll and carry out God's redemptive purposes.

Because the blood of the lamb doesn't just pay a debt, it wins a war.

The penalty is borne, the guilt is removed, the accuser is silenced, and the captives are set free.

The altar of sacrifice becomes the arena of victory.

[32 : 20] Righteous love has conquered by satisfying justice. And it's all accomplished by a single act. The lamb who was slain.

The lion conquers as the lamb, the crucified conqueror. And all those washed by his blood win.

So no wonder our final scene is so majestic. For in the remainder of Revelation chapter 5, we have a celestial chorus. Verses 9 and 10.

And it sang a new song saying, you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.

You see, why is Jesus so worthy of our worship? The middle of verse 9 tells us because he was slain.

[33 : 31] It is his substitutionary sacrifice that makes the lamb worthy of our worship. the lamb is worthy to open the scroll to move God's purposes forward to bring history to its consummation precisely because he died on the cross.

That's why the cross is at the center of our faith. love. And he did it all so he can have a relationship with you and I.

You see, look at the second half of verse 8. Did you notice what the 24 elders are holding? It is golden bowls full of incense.

Now, that might not sound very significant to us, but in the Old Testament, incense was a big deal. Only the priests were allowed to burn incense before God in the holy place of the tabernacle and then later the temple.

It was a privilege given to only a very small number of people. And throughout the Bible, incense symbolizes something that delights God.

[34 : 49] The sweet fragrance rises before him as an expression of worship that is pleasing to him. But here is the remarkable thing. Did you notice what this incense is?

It is the prayers of God's people. In other words, your prayers and my prayers.

It is the prayers you pray when you are sad and depressed, when you are confused and overwhelmed, when you are discontented and looking for answers.

And these prayers of yours rise into the very presence of God and are precious to him, precisely because of what Jesus has done.

Many of you know that we have a two and a half year old son, Linus, and he's at the stage where he likes to talk a lot to us. And even though his words are not grammatically correct or a bit gabbled sometimes, we love hearing him speak because we love him.

[36 : 04] So we treasure his attempts at relating to us. How much more with God? So think about that prayer you prayed when your mind was half distracted and you stumbled over your words.

Well, in Christ, God still heals them and he treasures them. After all, verse 9, he bought you at the cost of nothing less than his son.

Remember? So of course, he treasures everything you say, even all your babbling. My friends, this is why Jesus died.

So you can know God, be with him, enjoy friendship with him, and be truly known and cherished in return. And that's why all creation breaks out in praise.

Did you notice how this celestial chorus keeps expanding and expanding? It builds from the four living creatures and twenty-four elders in verse eight, to a choir of countless angels in verse eleven, and culminates in verse fourteen, with every single creature in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, giving glory to God.

[37 : 31] After all, when Christ came down for us and for our salvation, he didn't limit his work to a single ethnic group or territory. No. Instead, verse nine tells us, he purchased for God people from every tribe, language, people, and nation.

And that's why today the Nicene Creed is confessed by believers all around the world. In fact, did you know the early church fathers that I've been quoting, giants like Athanasius and Augustine, were not white European men, they were North Africans.

Sometimes people forget that. And when we confess together with them that for us and our salvation, he came down from heaven, we are really joining together with them in the throne room worship of Revelation 5.

We are holding up the cross and saying, this is God's ultimate victory, and we want to put it on display. Because as verse 10 reminds us, the crucified conqueror didn't just save us for the future, he made us a kingdom of priests right now.

In other words, we are his representatives reflecting the slain lamb to the world. How? By getting up every single day and persevering through our normal human struggles to live for him.

[39 : 09] knowing his strength is perfected in our weakness. And as we serve him, we hold on to this beautiful promise. We get to share in his eternal reign when he returns to open the scroll, bring true justice, and finish the rescue he started.

This is our great hope. hope. So the next time you see a cross on a building, on a necklace, on a screen, remember what it really is.

Then marvel and delight in his goodness and bring your prayers and praise to him. And then serve him sacrificially with all of your heart, conqueror.

Let's pray now. Father, as we come before you, we thank you so much again for the cross, for this victory won through the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

Again, Lord, help us not to take that cross for granted, reveal to us its many dimensions, its deep significance, and help us to cling to it each and every day, knowing that this is the reason why we do not have to fear death, why we do not have to fear Satan, that this is our great hope.

[40 : 45] And help us to live lives of worship, desiring to please you in every way, to live cross-shaped lives, knowing that glory awaits us.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.