

GOOD FRIDAY “THE OLD RUGGED CROSS” LUKE 23

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

The physical elements of the bread and the wine of Holy Communion or the water of Holy Baptism often reinforce and verify how real the saving Good News of Jesus is. Well, today, on Good Friday, we confront, with almost blunt force, the actual bloody instrument on which the Lord Jesus died—the wood of His cross. This is the next promised treasure for us to share today. The altar is stripped, the paraments are taken down! Everything is a simple and dark reminder that God’s own Son, Jesus Christ, has died.

What better reminder of His death for you is there today than to take home a little wooden cross? All of you should have received one as you entered worship today. This symbolically reveals the Father’s heartfelt love for the world. He did not spare His Son, His only Son, your substitute! Even Abraham did not have to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, since God provided a ram in the thicket to be sacrificed. But now the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, lovingly dies in your place.

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Tow’ring o’er the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime. (*LSB 427:1*)

The wood your cross is made of, has its own biblical history. In fact, wood is often used to rescue, sweeten, and raise up in the Bible. In Genesis, God placed two large wooden figures in the Garden of Eden—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—to test Adam and Eve. Noah later used gopher wood to build the ark that buoyed his family above the waters that drowned the entire world. After Moses led Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea, he threw a piece of wood into the bitter waters of Marah to sweeten them for Israel to drink.

Much later, in the time of the kings of Israel, the prophet Elisha cut a wooden stick and threw it into the Jordan River to raise up an iron axe head, which had mistakenly been flung into the river by one of the prophets who was cutting down a tree.

While none of these wood stories directly point to the cross upon which Jesus died, they indirectly reveal beautiful images of what the cross does to save you. The Early Church Fathers often excelled at these comparisons. They used a simple Bible story in a picturesque way to connect it to the whole story of salvation.

Reflect again on the story of Noah and the flood. Why did God tell Noah to build an ark out of wood? God could have chosen another way to destroy the world and save Noah and his family, but He didn't. Instead, God chose a wooden boat to keep Noah, his family, and all the animals safe. God used the wood to rescue them and enable them to float above the water.

What troubles flood your mind this Good Friday? Are you so overwhelmed with trouble from so many different things that you feel like you're drowning? Is it family fractures, relationship misunderstandings, frustrations at work, or having no work? Amid such troubled waters, the wood of Christ's cross promises to keep you afloat, rescuing you and carrying you through all the trials of life. Jesus was willingly flooded with the weight and guilt of this world's sin when He cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Yet by this, He, the righteous and sinless Son, conquered sin, death, and hell.

When the woes of life o'er take me,
Hopes deceive and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me;
Lo, it glows with peace and joy. (*LSB* 427:2)

Why did God tell Moses to throw a piece of wood in the bitter waters at Marah? To sweeten it so that the Israelites could drink it and live! Have you ever tasted bad water, like strong, iron, well-water or dirty water? You almost choke on it and can't get it down!

Well, God could have told Moses to throw anything into that water, even a rock. But no, God told Moses to throw a piece of wood into the bitter waters to make them drinkable and sweet.

Are there some bitter pills to swallow in your life? Do feelings of bitterness linger in your heart or soul against some people? Are you justly upset because you were wronged or betrayed? Even amid your bitterness and restlessness, God comes to sweeten and gladden your waters of life, so like an unclenched fist, you may open your hand again to others. Joseph forgave his brothers, who betrayed him and sold him into slavery, and Jesus bore betrayal from Judas, Peter, and all His disciples who fled Him. Similarly, this little wooden cross can sweeten bitterness and soften anger.¹ Jesus was betrayed, and His naked body was nailed to a tree so that sin and the bitterness and anger it breeds might be done forever.²

When the sun of bliss is beaming
Light and love upon my way,
From the cross the radiance streaming
Adds more luster to the day. (LSB 427:3)

Finally, consider Elisha and how God floated a heavy, iron axe head with a lighter piece of wood. Why didn't Elisha speak over it or motion his hand? He could have parted the Jordan River with his cloak and picked it up. Instead, by throwing in the piece of wood, he raised the weighted iron. That does not normally happen. When did you last see iron float? It doesn't, but the cross of Jesus uplifts you. Jesus lightens your load. He takes all your guilt, personal shame, worries, troubles, and sin and nails it to Himself. "Cast your burden on the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psalm 55:22). Although millions of things might be weighing you down right now—financial worries, marriage problems, children problems, sibling or friend problems, or cancer or chronic illness—God knows and cares.

¹ S. J. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2nd ed. (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1994), 113–14.

² Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate*, vol. 5, *West and East Syria* (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 1992), 69, 123–24.

Every day brings new burdens to test you and weigh you down like a heavy iron axe head. But Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28, 30). Your bloody Savior, Jesus Christ, invites you to cast every weight on Him so that by His cross, you are lightened, lifted up, and sustained by His forgiving grace. *(Hymn stanza may be sung.)*

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide. *(LSB 427:4)*05410

May Christ’s cross always rescue, sweeten, and lighten your life. As you hold this *wooden* cross, may it always remind you of the incredible love of Jesus! He gives you eternal life now. You are His forever because He shed His blood for you! That’s why today is Good Friday! Amen.

Now may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!