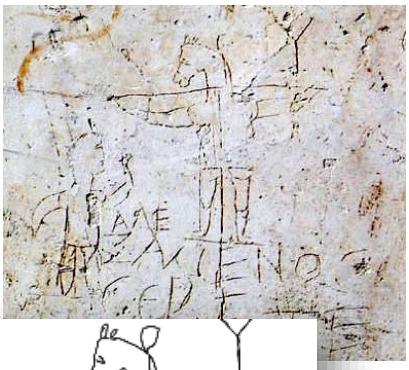
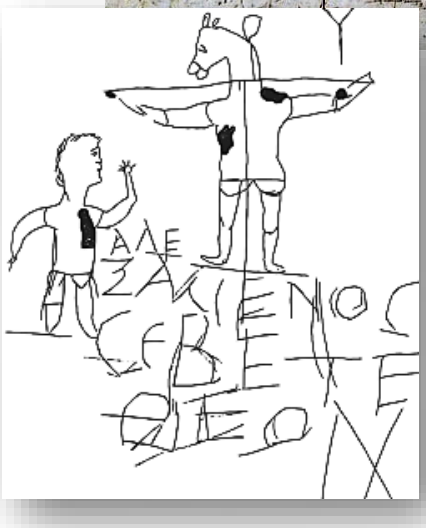
Bearing the Cross, Seeing the Glory

1. To most ancient pagans, early Christians seemed secretive, strange, and a little unsettling. They gathered before dawn, spoke mysteriously about their God, and spoke in ways that outsiders could barely understand. That secrecy sparked some wild rumors: people accused them of cannibalism, incest, and sinister nighttime rituals. Writers like Justin Martyr and Tertullian pushed back hard against these stories, but the gossip spread anyway, feeding fear and suspicion. Christians were mocked for worshipping a man who had been crucified—a death Romans considered humiliating and disgraceful—and some critics even claimed they worshipped a donkey-headed god, a slur that seems to have grown out of old anti-Jewish legends. In *To the Nations*, Tertullian accuses pagans of being no better. *"You in fact worship the ass in its entirety, not just the head. And then you throw in Epona, the patron saint of donkeys and all the beasts of burden, cattle, and wild animals. You even worship their stables. Perhaps this is your charge against us that in the midst of all these indiscriminate animal lovers, we save our devotion for asses alone" (XI).*





One of the clearest windows into the ancient mockery of Christians is the famous Alexamenos graffito, scratched into a wall of a Roman school ground by some schoolboy bully mocking his Christian classmate around AD 200. It shows a man worshipping a crucified figure with a donkey's head, alongside the words *"Alexamenos worships his God."* It's crude, sarcastic, and incredibly revealing. To the Roman world, the idea of honoring someone executed on a cross seemed absurd; to Christians, it was the heart of their faith. That clash helps explain why the crucifixion itself was rarely shown in early Christian art: it was simply too shocking, too shameful, and too easy for opponents to turn into a joke.

Read Luke 9:23-26. How can Christians live openly and wisely in a culture that often misunderstands what they believe?

Christians can live openly and wisely in a culture that misunderstands them by following Jesus' call in Luke 9:23–26 to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and not be ashamed of him. That means accepting that faithfulness to Christ may bring misunderstanding, ridicule, or rejection, just as it did for

the early Christians. Instead of responding with fear, anger, or embarrassment, Christians are called to live with courage, humility, and consistency.

Living openly means not hiding Christian identity or softening the message of Jesus just to gain approval. If Jesus himself was mocked and rejected, his followers should not be surprised when they are also misunderstood. At the same time, living wisely means responding in a way that reflects Christ's character—with patience, love, and integrity rather than hostility or self-righteousness. A Christian's life should help correct false assumptions by showing honesty, compassion, and hope in everyday actions.

Luke 9 also reminds believers that the opinion of society is not ultimate. Gaining acceptance from the world is not worth losing faithfulness to Christ. Christians should care more about being loyal to Jesus than about protecting their image. In a culture that often sees Christian belief as strange or offensive, the best witness is a life that is unashamed of Christ, shaped by sacrifice, and marked by grace.

2. The image of a donkey headed god. It's an image that captures the scandal of the cross and the contempt the ancient world felt toward a crucified Messiah. To be identified with Christ, then, is to bear that same cross of ridicule, rejection, and hatred. This is the Great Reversal at the heart of Jesus' teaching: to save life is to lose it, and to lose life for His sake is to save it.

5. Jesus is here mixing the physical and spiritual. For each of the following blanks insert the word "physical" or the word "spiritual" to make clearer what Jesus is saying.

   For whoever wants to save his _____ spiritual life will lose it (his _____ physical life) but whoever loses his _____ physical life *for me* will save it (his _____ spiritual life)" (9:24,NIV).

3. Skim through Ecclesiastes 1-2. We read that the "preacher of Jerusalem" had surpassed all in wisdom, wealth, pleasure, and accomplishments. But in the end they were all vanity. In this there is a profound warning to shun this world's definition of success. But even when one is in the process of denying the world and trying hard to follow Jesus, the world and our sinful flesh tries to pull us off the path. And it does so in a very subtle way. An example of this occurs in the sending out of the seventy (10:1-24). Jesus sends them out without provisions to heal and proclaim the kingdom of God. What do they rejoice about when they return (10:21)? But what did Jesus direct them to rejoice about instead (10:20)?

   The disciples rejoice that they have power over demons. They took *pride* in the *power* they had over demons. Jesus told them to rejoice that their names were written in heaven. Jesus refocused them from the joy of pride and power to the eschaton and the joy of eternal life.

4. An antidote against self-righteous pride is found in taking up the cross daily. A life of rejection and suffering looks forward to the joys of eternal life. A life of daily acknowledgement of sin, contrition, repentance, and confession looks forward to a future life without sin and its consequences, to the time when Christ comes again in glory and is not ashamed to acknowledge us as His own. Why? Not because of how awesome we are, but because it's in His nature to acknowledge and receive sinners. See Luke 5:31-32 and 7:34.

5 In light of Christ's transfiguration, we can understand what Jesus meant in verse 27 when He said that some standing there would not taste death before they saw the kingdom of God. Peter, James, and John certainly were given a an incredible glimpse of Christ's majesty as His divine glory shone before them in full force. On that mountain, they not only saw His glory, but they also heard the Father's own voice affirm that Jesus is the beloved Son of God. What did Peter later say about this in 2 Peter 1:17–18?

† Out of all the events he could have written about, why do you think he chose the transfiguration rather than the resurrection or ascension?

For Peter, this must have remained one of the most life-changing moments of his walk with Christ That vision of glory surely helped anchor Peter's faith and gave him confidence in Christ's promise to come again in power and majesty.

The Resurrection and Ascension stand as astonishing and indispensable testimonies to the identity and authority of Christ. They powerfully confirm His victory over death, His exaltation, and the truth of His mission. Yet, considered by themselves, they do not display with the same immediacy the full radiance of His divine nature. Concerning the resurrection, consider how Scripture records that others, though merely human, were also taken into heaven—Enoch and Elijah. Likewise, Jesus Himself raised others from the dead during His earthly ministry. These acts, while extraordinary, do not in themselves uniquely disclose the inner glory of Christ's person.

The Transfiguration, however, is of a different order altogether. There, the veil was drawn back, and Jesus was revealed not simply as a wonder-working prophet or exalted servant of God, but in the unveiled splendor of His divine majesty. On the holy mountain, His glory shone forth in a manner that unmistakably testified to His divine identity. This was not merely a display of power, but a manifestation of essence—a revelation of who He truly is. The Father's voice from heaven further confirmed this, bearing witness that Jesus is the beloved Son, worthy not only of admiration, but of worship and obedience. In the Transfiguration, the disciples were granted a foretaste of the kingdom and a glimpse of the eternal glory that belongs to Christ as true God, equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

† How does Peter continue this thought in the verses that follow?

Peter goes on to connect this experience to the certainty of Christ's coming kingdom. He writes, "We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (verse 19). Peter points us to the Scriptures and reminds us that God's promises are sure. In a world that often feels dark, uncertain, and weary, the Word of God remains a steady light. The same Jesus whose glory was revealed on the mountain will come again, and because of that, we are called to live with hope, faith, and holy expectation. The day of the Lord will come, and with it the joy of His reward.

6 Luke alone tells us that on the mountain Jesus, Moses, and Elijah spoke about the "exodus" he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. That word immediately takes us back to a very important Old Testament story. What story is that and what is the connection to Christ's work in His crucifixion, resurrection and Ascension? Israel's exodus from Egypt—the great Old Testament story of God

rescuing His people from slavery is a crucifixion, resurrection and ascension story. God's people were in slavery and death. They were led through the Red Sea into new life with God in the wilderness. There God appears on the mountain. They later entered the Promised Land. Luke uses the Exodus to show that Jesus is about to lead a greater exodus: through his death, resurrection, and ascension, he will deliver his people not from Pharaoh, but from sin, death, and the power of evil. Moses is also present here at the Transfiguration. He was a type of Christ in the first Exodus.

7. Why is Peter's response so odd and out of place? And what should our response be?

Peter's response to the Transfiguration is so very human. Faced with the blazing glory of Jesus, standing with Moses and Elijah, Peter feels the need to say something, to do something, to contribute to the moment: "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents…" But before Peter can finish, God the Father interrupts him. The divine voice does not invite Peter to build, organize, or speak further. Instead, it directs his attention where it belongs: "This is my beloved Son… listen to Him."

That is the heart of the passage. In the presence of Jesus' glory, Peter's ideas, plans, and words are not the focus. Jesus is.

How often our response is like Peter's. We want to manage holy moments, preserve spiritual highs, or insert ourselves into what God is doing. We may even imagine that when we stand before God in glory, we will finally ask all the questions we have stored up through the years. But scenes like this remind us that when we truly behold Christ as He is, our questions will likely fall away. We will not be preoccupied with our own thoughts. We will be captivated by Him.

And Peter never forgot it. As we read earlier, years later he reflected on this moment in 2 Peter 1:16–18, insisting that he was not following cleverly invented myths, but had been an eyewitness of Christ's majesty. The glory he saw confirmed forever that Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be. That same vision should steady us too. When our faith feels weak, when Jesus seems ordinary to our distracted hearts, the Transfiguration calls us back to reality: He is the glorious Son of God, and He is worthy to be followed.

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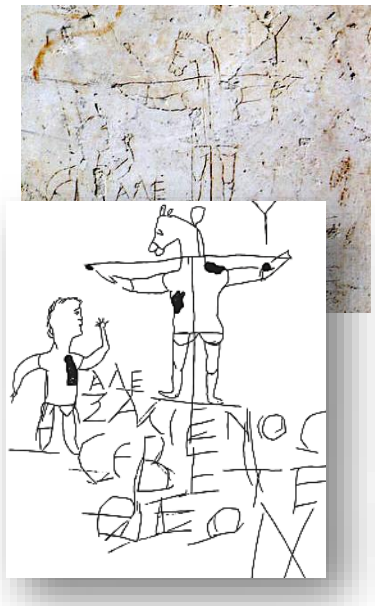

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