

John of Damascus and Christ Crucified

Review:

- **James, Peter, Paul** (The Worthiness of Christ)
- **Polycarp** (The Faithfulness of Christ)
- **Perpetua** (The Love of God)
- **Constantine** (The Sovereignty of God)
- **Athanasius** (The Trinity)
- **Patrick** (The Mercy of God)
- **Augustine** (The Grace of God)
- **Benedict of Nursia** (Christ's church)

Why do we study church history?

1. To glorify God and praise him for his wise providence.
2. To be encouraged by the faith of our spiritual family.
3. To learn from the past as we navigate the present.
4. To build a healthy church.

It's helpful for us to review, but it's also useful because today we'll have to use our church history knowledge to do some analysis on a potentially heretical teaching.

Here's the statement:

"There is one God, creator of all things,
who has neither been begotten nor has begotten...
the Christ is the Word of God and His Spirit, but a creature and a servant,
And that He was begotten, without seed, of Mary the sister of Moses and Aaron."¹

"...the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did he die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven. And he says this, that when the Christ had ascended into heaven God asked Him: 'O Jesus didst thou say: 'I am the Son of God and God'? And Jesus,... answered: 'Be merciful to me, Lord. Thou knowest that I did not say this and that I did not scorn to be thy servant. But sinful men have written that I have made this statement, and they have lied about me and have fallen into error.' And God answered and said to Him: 'I know that thou didst not say this word.'"²

What's your verdict?

Yeah, no.

John of Damascus' Verdict:

¹John of Damascus, *The Fount of Knowledge* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 153. Accessed from <https://archive.org/details/writingsthefount0037john/page/152/mode/2up>

²John of Damascus, 154.

"There are many other extraordinary and quite ridiculous things in this book which he [Muhammad] boasts was sent down to him from God."³

"Then they reply that the book came down to him while he was asleep. Then we jokingly say to them that, as long as *he* received the book in his sleep and did not actually sense the operation, then the popular adage applies to him (which runs: You're spinning me dreams.)

When we ask again: 'How is it that when he enjoined us in this book of yours not to do anything or receive anything without witnesses, you did not ask him: 'First do you show us by witnesses that you are a prophet and that you have come from God, and show us just what Scriptures there are that testify about you' '—they are ashamed and remain silent. [Then we continue:] 'Although you may not marry a wife without witnesses, or buy, or acquire property; although you neither receive a donkey or possess a beast of burden unwitnessed; and although you do possess both wives and property and donkeys and so on through witnesses, yet it is only your faith and your scriptures that you hold unsubstantiated by witnesses. For he who handed this down to you has no warranty from any source, nor is there anyone known who testified about him before he came. On the contrary, he received it while he was asleep.'⁴

- John went even so far as to call the muslims "mutilators of God" because they attempted to divide the Trinity into pieces, mutilating it.
- Of note is that John says that Muhammad received his initial instruction from an Arian monk.⁵ *What about John's description of muslim doctrine might tip you off to this claim?*

But who was John?

Early-mid life:

- John of Damascus was a native Syrian who, like his name suggests, was from the city of Damascus.
- John grew up in a muslim environment. Muhammad (570-632) and his heretical teachings about Christ made a swift impact on the world as practitioners of Islam spread its ideals, political as well as military influence quickly around the Arabian Peninsula, across North Africa, up into Spain, and in Judea and Syria. These lands which had formerly been part of the Roman empire quickly fell to the new muslim invaders.
- In fact, it is thought that it was John's grandfather who, seeing the writing on the wall, had played the major role in surrendering the city to the conquerors.
- Both his father and his grandfather had worked for the muslim caliphs who had conquered Judea and Syria in the 630s.
- It is thought that John too worked for the muslim government, though in a lesser capacity than his father or grandfather.

³John of Damascus, 154.

⁴John of Damascus, 155.

⁵John of Damascus, 153.

Theological Contributions:

- John is considered one of the founding theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Theologically, he was not an innovator. Rather, he was a synthesizer of the doctrinal truths that had developed up to his time. He compiled all these into a single work called *On the Orthodox Faith*. As mentioned before, he also wrote all about the heresies that had infiltrated the church, which is why we have the information about Islam above.
- John received his education from a kidnapped Sicilian monk named Cosmas who John's father paid a great price for. This was a blessing since it granted John access to both Arabic and Greek literature from which he profited immensely.
- Interestingly John recorded the sect of the Ishmaelites as one of the more than 100 Christian heresies that had sprung up since the beginning of the church. He viewed it as a fatal deviation from Christianity not as a religion in its own right.
- Eventually, John left Damascus—likely because the Islamic government removed Christians from their posts—and joined a monastery near Jerusalem called Mar Saba.
- It was from Mar Saba that he would live out the remainder of his days reading, writing, and doing other monkish activities.

Why is John Significant?

- John of Damascus is the first Christian to respond to Islam. His critique is early but precise and lays bare the fundamental problems with Islamic theology. *Specifically, we will take a look at its understanding of Jesus's death.*
- Do you remember what was cited earlier:
 - "...the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did he die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven."⁶
 - John is loosely citing Surah 4:157: "We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain."⁷
 - Islamic theology acknowledges Jesus but denies the Trinity.
 - Islamic theology denies that Jesus truly died on the cross.

What is at stake in denying Jesus's identity and death?

If the Islamic doctrine is to be believed what is lost?

Let's read John's account of Jesus's death—John 19:16-42.

What was happening at the crucifixion:

- *Humanity's sinful nature was displayed (Jer 17:9).*

⁶John of Damascus, 154.

⁷Muhammad M. Pickthall, ed., *The Quran* (Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, n.d.).

- “God says that the heart of man is ‘desperately wicked’ (Jer 17:9), and it was so demonstrated by the treatment of His beloved Son.”⁸
- How could men be so callous in their hearts as to kill the one who has been sent to save their souls? And yet we find the same people who cried “Hosannah” upon Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem now calling for his crucifixion. They hated Christ without a cause (Jn 15:25).
- This reveals just a noxious whiff of the sinfulness of every human heart. We are not good, ever since Adam we have been corrupted from our very core. We are dead in our sins and trespasses (Eph 2:1).
- The radiant light of Christ’s righteousness reveals the darkness of our sin. It is in his light that we see ourselves truly and recognize the immensity of our sinfulness.⁹

- **Mercy was poured out (Lk 23:33-43).** Not only this but while he was being crucified he was full of mercy. Jesus was not full of rage, cursing, and bitterness. He was full of prayer, asking that his Father would forgive his persecutors “for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).¹⁰
 - It was even upon the cross that Jesus poured out his mercy upon the thief upon his own cross saying to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). Jesus does not turn away any who come to him in faith. In this we witness “an unparalleled display of sovereign grace to one of the greatest of sinners.”¹¹
 - You too, brother and sister, may receive mercy from God but only because Jesus Christ, God the Son, has suffered in your place. He shed his blood—in other words, he gave his life—that you may have forgiveness and abundant life through him.
- **God the Son was slain (Phil 2:5-11).** “They behold the most amazing event of all history, the most awe-inspiring spectacle men ever saw, the most tragic and yet the most glorious deed ever performed. They beheld God incarnate taken by wicked hands and slain—and at the same time the Redeemer voluntarily laying down His life for those who have forfeited every claim upon Him.”¹²
 - Muhammad found it to be preposterous that Jesus was God, much less that God the Son would subject himself to such a humiliating death as being crucified on a cross—however, that is exactly what we see Jesus, God the Son, doing.
 - And think, what monstrous wickedness was ever done but that evil men should crucify Love incarnate? This is the terrible climax of sin. The one

⁸Pink, 221.

⁹Pink, 221.

¹⁰Pink, 219.

¹¹Pink, 219.

¹²Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Nature of God* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 219.

who covered Adam and Eve in the Garden is now being crucified by their children outside of it.¹³

- **Jesus said “It is finished” (Jn 19:30; Isa 53:4-6).** At the cross, Jesus was not merely being crucified, he was also bearing the sins of all his people. You see, it had been God’s eternal plan to place the sin of his chosen people upon the spotless, sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ.
 - Our sins and all their consequences were paid for upon the cross by Jesus Christ. He took the punishment we deserve.
 - He has borne our griefs, carried our sorrows, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, his chastisement brought us peace, and it is by his wounds that we are healed.
 - Truly, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).
 - Better still, he said, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). Christ’s death on our behalf never needs to be repeated again. By this one act, he has paid for our sins for all time. We do not and cannot work to earn this forgiveness. Instead, we merely receive it by faith.
 - “God’s justice was satisfied by Christ and therefore His mercy flows freely to all who repent and believe.”¹⁴
 - Brothers and sisters, Christ hung upon the cross bleeding and dying for you. He died so that you may live. Not only this, Christ rose victoriously from the grave and forever lives to make intercession for you. He gives you his incorruptible, resurrection life. Now he invites you to come to him so that you may receive his forgiveness and all appropriate all the blessings of heaven.
- *Read Isaiah 55:1-3.*

As Christians, we can point to the day of Christ’s death and say, “That is the day that my sin died. It is finished. It is paid for. I have been healed.”

Islam has no such doctrine. In all its perversions from the Truth, Islam has no gospel. It has no definitive way for the sins of its followers to be dealt with. And as such, they all remain condemned under the judgment of God and are subject to his undying wrath.

Without Christ Jesus truly dying upon the cross, our sin is not truly paid for, the serpent’s head is not truly crushed, and we are still dead in our rebellion against God. There is hope for ruined sinners only in Christ and him crucified. In Islam there is no hope whatsoever.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. While this is vitally significant. This is only the tip of the iceberg. During and after the seventh century, Islam came into vogue and we still contend with this teaching of demons today. There are many other doctrines that are taught in its system that are deeply opposed to the truth. But we have briefly talked about the reality of the

¹³Pink, 221.

¹⁴Pink, 223.

crucifixion of Jesus Christ today to show its absolute importance in our lives as Christians. John of Damascus was right to criticize the followers of Muhammad for their lies about Jesus. For our part, we are called to be loving to all and proclaim the gospel to those who have been eaten up by Islam and its false teaching.

Conclusion:

May we remember the day that death died. Jesus's death upon the cross and his resurrection is truly the death of death and all our sin and misery. May we praise God for his objective work of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord!