

The Cross of Christ

During the ministry years of Jesus, before He was crucified, any examination of His disciples would tell you that they were not an impressive lot. They didn't understand Jesus, and didn't seem to endorse or even grasp the mission He was on. They kept doing things or suggesting things that were at odds with who Jesus was, and this during the time that He was preparing them to take over His ministry and reach the world with the good news of the Kingdom come. If you didn't know what you know now and were looking at how well prepared they were to carry on the mission once Jesus was gone, before the crucifixion you would have to give them long odds, very little chance of doing well. Nothing in their resume up until that point indicated they would be world-changers, and yet Jesus was ready to hand the whole hope of the world to these unlikely men.

Before the crucifixion, Jewish families would carefully raise and care for a new lamb, every year, a lamb that would become an offering, a sacrifice, for their sin. And every year they would take that lamb to the temple in Jerusalem and hand it over to the priest who would inspect it for blemishes and then spill its blood on the altar as an atonement for the sins of those who were offering that lamb. The lamb's blood was offered as a substitute for their blood. Instead of the people dying for their rebellion against God, a lamb would die in their stead and they would go free.

Before the crucifixion, there wasn't a lot of hope for people in the West who weren't on the side of Rome. They were oppressed and taxed severely and any insurrection, any rebellion, was put down with cruel force. When Jesus was a boy, a man named Judas of Galilee led a revolt against Roman taxation and he and 2000 followers were crucified by the Romans ... and the bodies were left on the crosses as a reminder: pay your taxes, or else. I wonder if young Jesus ever saw those crucifixions and what He thought.

Before the crucifixion there was massive inequality among different groups of people in the Roman Empire. Slaves made up as much as 40% of the population of ancient Rome and maybe 35% of the people who lived throughout what we now call Italy. The elites made up less than 2% of the population and they were both wealthy and powerful.

After the cross and after the resurrection, the world began to change. The disciples became new men, boldly proclaiming forgiveness and new life through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Those who believed their message, and in the early days a great many of them were Jews, no longer brought a lamb to the temple to provide a payment for their sins; they accepted the atoning sacrifice of Jesus instead. And the cross became a turning point in the interactions of different classes of humans. Slaves would sit down at the same table as slave-owners and women would sit at the same table with men. People shared one another's burdens, financial and otherwise, some selling pieces of land in order to provide for the needs of those who were poor. Through the centuries, the world received the grace of the cross through those who had been impacted by it - orphanages were started, babies were saved from death and adopted,

eventually hospitals and schools and universities were founded to meet society's needs. Other Christians saw needs and worked to meet them - which is how the Red Cross began, and the nursing movement, and medical missions in poorer countries and mercy ships that take medical clinics to coastal ports in those countries and leprosariums like the one my half-sister worked in for many years in Nigeria, and on and on it goes -- and those examples are just medical ones.

So the cross is the significant turning point in so many ways for the people of this planet -- whether they are willing to acknowledge it or not.

The Scriptures tell us clearly what took place on the cross. They tell us that the event occurred during the feast of Passover, the time when Jews came to their holy city to remember their deliverance from Egypt. It was a time to remember that they had once been slaves but had been ransomed from slavery, delivered from their captors and led to the Promised Land. It was a time when fathers told their children that the blood of a lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts of their homes and that their homes, alone in all Egypt, were spared the visit of the angel of death who, on seeing the blood on the doorposts, passed over them. It was a time to be thankful, to honor God and to celebrate freedom.

In one cryptic little sentence in his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote these words:

Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. (5:7)

It wasn't just a coincidence that the crucifixion of Jesus took place during the Jewish Passover feast. It was the timing of God. And it was the fulfillment of all previous Passover Feasts, because Jesus' sacrifice was given only once and for all time. There is now no further need for sacrifices because the ultimate sacrifice has been made.

But some people object that the cross wasn't really necessary, that God could have forgiven humans' sin without resorting to such a violent and painful solution. They say that because they are repulsed by the thought of Jesus, whom they would regard as a good and kind man, suffering an agonizing death because of our sin. But is there really another out, an easier way to deal with the problem of sin and evil that we so willingly participate in? Is there an "option B" that would be less painful for God and less condemning of us? Why does it have to be blood to pay the price for our rebellion against God? When I hear those kinds of questions, my strongest reaction is, "Who do we think we are to be acting as if we were the ones who had to decide these things? This takes us back to the first temptation in the Garden: "Did God really say?" Here we are asking, or trying to answer, the question, "Did God really say that the penalty for sin was death and did He really say that life is in the blood and did He really ask us for a sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sin?" Yes, that's what God really said and that's what our understanding of the cross is based around: rebellion against God is a sin that deserves the highest penalty, the death penalty. Rebellion against the Giver of life requires that we forfeit the gift that He has given.

Could God just whip out the “Get Out of Jail Free” card and give us a pass on our sin? The answer to that dodgy little question is an emphatic, “No! To do that would imply that sin is not serious and that we are free to be and to do whatever we want in this world, without fear of any consequences. Again and again it comes down to the answer to the question, “Who’s in charge?” If God is the ruler, then we need to answer to Him. If we are in charge, then we have no need for God and aren’t accountable to Him. And that’s the motivation behind a whole lot of the rebellion that goes on against God’s rule in the world today. If we can convince the world that Darwinism is true, then we can do whatever we want sexually with whoever we want and we don’t have to answer to the church. That was the line of reasoning proposed by the humanist Julian Huxley back in the mid-20th century - an escape from Christian morality.

When you want something badly enough, you’ll sacrifice a lot to get it, and the humanists have rejected belief in God and have established a religious faith in evolution. I know that sounds trite and biased, but I read an insightful article recently which quoted a number of evolutionists, including Huxley, who ascribe to evolution things like “purpose” and “destiny”, as if they could have blind chance and some spiritual significance at the same time. By the way, Huxley wasn’t just aiming at getting God out of the picture; his vision involved getting rid of a lot of ‘undesirable’ people as well; like Hitler, he dreamed of a master race.

The bottom line is that God, not us, decides just how serious our rebellion is, and the price that must be paid for our forgiveness. It is God who has determined that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. It is God’s choice to pay, Himself, the just penalty for our sin and to bear the pain, Himself, that we deserved to bear.

Now, I’m going to read some verses of Scripture, without much comment, that describe various aspects of the cross of Christ. Let’s begin with a fairly lengthy passage from Romans 5:

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, no one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, He will certainly save us from God’s judgment. For since we were restored to friendship with God by the death of His Son while we were still His enemies, we will certainly be delivered from eternal punishment by His life. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God -- all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. And though there was no law to break, since it had not yet been given, they all died anyway -- even though they did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. What a contrast between Adam and Christ, who was yet to come! And what a difference between our sin and

God's generous gift of forgiveness. For this one man, Adam, brought death to many through his sin. But this other man, Jesus Christ brought forgiveness to many through God's bountiful gift. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but we have the free gift of being accepted by God, even though we are guilty of many sins.

The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God's wonderful gracious gift of righteousness will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:6-17)

And a second passage that explains what Jesus did for us on the cross - this time from Colossians 2:

You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross. In this way, God disarmed the evil rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by His victory over them on the cross of Christ. (13-15)

And one more, also from Colossians:

By Him (Jesus) God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of His blood on the cross. This includes you who were once so far away from God. You were His enemies, separated from Him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now He has brought you back as His friends. He has done this through His death on the cross in His own human body. As a result, He has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before Him without a single fault. (Col. 1:20-22)

What do you see from those three passages that you haven't seen quite that way before? Here are a few possibilities and I'll end by asking you to reflect on these insights into the meaning of the cross:

1. The modern person doesn't like to think this way, but the text tells us that, without the cross, we were and are, totally helpless. You can have PhD's after your name and have the world's highest IQ, but you are utterly unable to save yourself from the judgment of God - you and I needed the sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross.
2. Sin infects the entire human race. I know we believe that, but just think about how people who didn't even have laws to obey were still rebels against God and sinful in their attitudes and actions. This pride that tells us that we don't need God, that we're free to do whatever we want, that we have no obligation to a Creator - this was in humans from the beginning. So it didn't matter if there was a written legal code to disobey - we were rebels against the Lord God in our hearts, which always produces some degree of rebellion in our actions.
3. Did you notice that the key to living in victory over the power of sin is to receive God's gift? Let me read it to you again ... "The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God's wonderful gracious gift of righteousness will

live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.” You may or may not use the phrase “living in triumph” to describe your life right now, but the powerful potential is there for us all - we who receive the gift of righteousness that God offers us through Jesus, are overcomers, and will triumph over sin and death through Him.

4. God has disarmed the evil spiritual authorities. How did He do that? By destroying the record containing the charges against us. “He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.” That was the victory of the cross, taking away the basis for the Accuser’s accusations, the record of our wrongs. It’s gone!
5. A fifth thing to ponder: at the cross, God reconciled everything to Himself. He has made peace with everything in heaven and on earth and He has even made His enemies - us rebels - into His friends. And this reconciliation is so complete that we are being brought into the presence of God where we stand holy and blameless and without a single fault. Can you believe how good this good news really is?
6. And finally, God’s motivation for doing this is made perfectly clear: “God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us...” This love produces, for us, forgiveness, friendship with God, peace with God, right standing with God, freedom from the fear of punishment, and the welcome acceptance of our loving Father. The cross is where all of this takes place- it is our anchor, our hope, our joy.