

Chapter One

The Meaning of the Cross

What the Cross Means to God

In this book we will explore the meaning of the cross of Christ. And as we think about the cross we must be as Moses was before the burning bush. We must indeed fear and remove our shoes for we are standing on holy ground. Indeed, all of God's Word is holy. But every promise, every miracle, every act of blessing, grace and mercy was blood bought at the cross.

It is crucial that we understand the meaning and purpose of Christ's death on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is the foundation and motivation for our faith, hope and love. This is why in Galatians 6:14 the apostle Paul wrote,

But God forbid that I should boast
except in the cross of our Lord Jesus
Christ, by whom the world has been
crucified to me, and I to the world.

It is also necessary for us to understand the meaning of the cross, because there are so many critics who reject the truth that we are redeemed by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. For various reasons Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified or resurrected. Jews are offended at the idea of a crucified Messiah. And even many Christians reject blood theology, because they view the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus as primitive and barbaric. One theologian called it "slaughter house religion."¹ But God's Word clearly states,

In Him [Christ] we have redemption
through His blood, the forgiveness of
sins, according to the riches of His grace
(Ephesians 1:7)

And Jesus Christ himself declared in Luke 24:46,

Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary
for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick was a very influential, liberal theologian and pastor of the last century who promoted this idea. And his influence is still felt today.

dead the third day²

When we think about Christ's sacrifice on the cross we should see not the brutality of God in sacrificing His Son, we should see the dreadful wickedness of sin that demanded it. In His deep love for us God decreed that the penalty for our sins should be borne by a substitute. And on that decree was built the Old Testament system of sacrifices. Instead of our blood being shed an animal was sacrificed. In Leviticus 17:11, God said,

For the life of the flesh *is* in the blood,
and I have given it to you upon the
altar to make atonement for your souls;
for it *is* the blood *that* makes atonement
for the soul.³

All of the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is why John the Baptist introduced Jesus by proclaiming, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

In this series we will examine the sacrifice of Christ on the cross from five perspectives. First, what the cross meant to God. Second, what the cross meant to Christ. Third, what the cross meant to Satan. Fourth, what the cross means to the world. And finally, what the cross means to us, the church.

What the cross meant to God was three things. First, it showed that He is righteous. Second, it demonstrates His love for us. And third, it showed that He was reconciling the world to Himself. Let's examine the first point.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight,

² The Old Testament references to the suffering and resurrection of Messiah would include Psalm 16:9-11; Psalm 22; Psalm 69; Isaiah 52:14-53:12; Zechariah 12:10:13:7. See also Luke 24:26, 27 which says, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" 27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." Christ would have pointed to prophetic passages such as Genesis 3:15; Numbers 21:6-9; Jeremiah 23:5, 6; Daniel 9:26 and explained their true meaning.

³ The "soul" *nephesh* in Hebrew and *psuche* in Greek means you, the whole person and not some invisible life force within you.

for by the law is the knowledge of sin.
(Romans 3:19, 20)

All of us fail God's law at some point. And James 2:10 says that if we "keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, [we are] guilty of all." Therefore, even at our best we are guilty before a righteous and holy, good God. And therefore, God must punish sinners, because He is righteous and just. And yet His mercy and love compels Him to forgive and to save. So what is God to do? Is it possible for God's moral and righteous character to be revealed in some other way than putting us all to death? Yes. Let's find out how.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets
(Romans 3:21)

All the world stands guilty before God. "But now" says Scripture, something has happened that allows God to be righteous and condemn sin and yet forgive sinners.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
(Romans 3:21-24)

The Old Testament law can never make us righteous, because we all will break the law at some point. But the Old Testament law with its sacrifices and the prophets who foretold of a Savior pointed to a new way to save sinners and make them righteous. In His grace God provides us with His own righteousness through our faith in our substitute, Jesus Christ. We are justified or cleared of all of our sins "freely" without any work or merit or cost to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the

sins that were previously committed,
(Romans 3:25)

The death of Christ on the cross was a “propitiation.” This word means to avert the anger and wrath of an offended and wronged person by satisfying the demands of justice. When someone does something wrong against another, something must be done to bring justice to the offended party and also to punish the offender.

What would you think about a judge who let a thief go free and you are denied justice? Well, God has been offended. His moral law has been broken. And since God is holy and righteous He cannot allow sinners to go unpunished. If God were to simply forgive us He would cease to be holy and just. AS the just judge of all the earth God must pour out His wrath. And He did that in the death of Christ on the cross.

What the cross means to God was that He proved He was righteous, in punishing sin, while being merciful to sinners, because He punished sin in Jesus Christ on the cross.

whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
(Romans 3:25, 26)

As the wrath of God fell upon Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, it was turned away from us. God punished sins so He is just and righteous. At the cross He demonstrated that He is righteous.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to communicate biblical truth to secular people is their mind set. It is a mind set that begins with man as the basic reality of the universe. Our rights and our needs is the measure of all things. The apostle Paul calls this the mind of the flesh of the carnal mind.⁴

A biblical mind set understand that God, and not man, is the basic reality of the universe. God has rights as the Creator of all there is—even us. And so the inner most meaning of the cross is that God is right and good and just to punish

⁴ Romans 8:6, 7; 1 Corinthians 2:14

sin, immediately. People should die forever. But God has not done that. For centuries and even now God has forgiven sin. And so, is He an unjust judge?

Here is the meaning of sin, any sin. Do you remember the story of when King David took Uriah's wife, Bathsheba and then had Uriah killed? When God confronted David through the prophet Nathan, David was asked, "Why have you despised the Lord? The problem was that David wasn't thinking about honoring God and bring Him glory. David was deep in lust.

David didn't think about God. He didn't value God or His moral law, he wanted Bathsheba. In the same way, we do not value God when we sin. We cheapen Him with our thoughts and actions. But David did not die for what he did. And neither do we instantly die when we sin. God is merciful to us. So, is God unjust not to instantly carry out a death sentence on us?

No! He is righteous, because He laid all of our iniquity on Christ. God punished sin in full in our substitute. God is both just, punishing sins and the justifier, freeing us from all sins. In Psalm 85:10 it is written, "Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed." That happened at the cross. Truth and righteousness punished sin and mercy and peace justified and forgave sinners. So, the cross proves that God is righteous. He has not just winked at sin. But the cross also demonstrates that God loves us.

For when we were still without strength,
in due time Christ died for the ungodly.
⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will
one die; yet perhaps for a good man
someone would even dare to die.

⁸ But God demonstrates His own love
toward us, in that while we were still
sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more
then, having now been justified by His
blood, we shall be saved from wrath
through Him.

¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we
were reconciled to God through the
death of His Son, much more, having
been reconciled, we shall be saved
by His life. ¹¹ And not only *that*, but we
also rejoice in God through our Lord
Jesus Christ, through whom we have
now received the reconciliation.

(Romans 5: 6-11)

When we were morally helpless to do anything to earn salvation, God ordained Jesus Christ to receive the penalty for sin that we deserved. In doing this God demonstrates how deeply He loves us. The word "demonstrates" in verse 8 means to establish or to prove. God proves His love for us, notice it is not that God "demonstrated" past tense, but He continually proves that He loves us by the cross of Christ.

When we were bankrupt of holiness, so unlike God, so unlike Christ, we were reconciled to God by Christ's sacrifice. And every time you think on this reality, the love of God is proved to you. The death of Christ on the cross is the ark that saved us from the flood of God's wrath against sin. But it is the love of God for us, the deep love of God that built the ark.

What does the cross mean to God? By the cross God proves that He is holy and righteous. By the cross God demonstrates that He loves us deeply and sacrificially. And so Romans 8:32 declares, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

Would God ever do less for us, now that we are His children than He did for us when we were still sinners? No, He will do more. Now, finally what the cross means to God is that in that event he was reconciling all of us to Himself.

that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.
(2 Corinthians 5:19)

It was God who initiated the cross that brought a change in our relationship with Him. As 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us." At the cross God was not counting our sins, but clothing us in His own righteousness.

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
(2 Corinthians 5:20, 21)

God does not set aside His moral law when He forgives us. He upholds it. He forgives all of our sins on the grounds of the just punishment of sin at the cross. God is righteous. God is also love. He demonstrates it at the cross by which we are reconciled to Him. He clothes us in His own righteousness. And gives us a ministry to go and share His Word and His love.