

Salvation: The Cross

“Why the Cross?” by Jerry Bridges

The death of Jesus was the most remarkable event in all of history. Centuries before it occurred, it was predicted in amazing detail by various Old Testament prophets. The supernatural phenomena that accompanied the actual event dramatically set it apart from all other deaths before and after.

The Scriptures tell us that during the crucifixion, the bright midday sun was totally obscured from high noon until 3PM so that the whole land was plunged into darkness. At the precise moment of His death, the thick curtain in the Jewish temple, which set apart the Most Holy Place (the inner room where God symbolically dwelt), was ripped from top to bottom by an invisible hand. An earthquake split the rocks and broke open nearby tombs. Dead people were raised to life and came out of the tombs, later appearing to people in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:45,51-53).

Three days after His death, Jesus arose from the dead and appeared to His disciples on numerous occasions over a period of forty days. And at one time, he even appeared to five hundred at once. At the end of that time, the apostles saw Him taken up from their sight into a cloud from which He ascended into heaven.

Today, some two thousand years after Christ's death and resurrection, the cross is the universally recognized symbol of the Christian faith. [...] At the time of Christ's death, however, the cross was an instrument of incredible horror and shame. It was a most wretched and degrading punishment, inflicted only on slaves and the lowliest of people. If free men were at any time subjected to crucifixion for the great crimes such as treason or insurrection, the sentence could not be executed until they were put in the category of slaves by degradation and their freedom taken away by flogging.

What are we to make of all this? Why was Christ's death such an amazing event in itself? And how could it be that the eternal Son of God, by whom and for whom all things were created (Colossians 1:15-16), would end up in His human nature dying one of the most cruel and humiliating deaths ever devised by mankind?

We must say God's holiness demanded it as punishment for our sins, and God's love provided it to save us from our sins. We cannot begin to understand the true significance of the cross unless we understand something of the holiness of God and the depth of our sin. And it is a continuing sense of the imperfection of our obedience, arising from the constant presence and remaining power of indwelling sin, that drives us more and more as believers to an absolute dependence on the grace of God given to us through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that Jesus' death on the cross did not take Him by surprise. He continually predicted it to His disciples. (See Luke 18:31-33 for one example.) And with His impending crucifixion before Him, Jesus Himself said, "What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour" (John 12:27). Jesus said He came to die.

But why? Why did Jesus come to die? The apostles Paul and Peter give us the answer in clear, concise terms. Paul wrote, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," and Peter wrote, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Peter 3:18).

Christ died for our sins. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, took upon Himself a human nature and died a horrible death on our behalf. That is the reason for the cross. He suffered what we should have suffered. He died in our place to pay the penalty for our sins.

Adam's Sin

We will never understand the cross until we begin to understand something of the nature and depth of our sin. And to understand that, we must go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, He imposed a simple prohibition on them. They were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why did God not impose some restriction such as, "You shall not steal" or "You shall not murder"? The answer is that God had created Adam and Eve in His image (see Genesis 1:27), which includes, among other things, His moral image. In other words, Adam and Eve were created morally perfect. They were completely sinless and thus did not need moral restrictions placed on them.

God, however, purposed to test their obedience, so He imposed one restriction on them: They were not to eat of the forbidden tree. There was nothing inherently evil about that tree. God could have selected any tree of the garden. Nor was obedience difficult. Many kinds of trees in the garden were pleasing to the eye and good for food. An easier test of Adam and Eve is difficult to imagine. Abstention from the forbidden fruit involved no hardship, no inconvenience, just simple obedience.

Yet when the Serpent questioned God's goodness and truthfulness, Eve capitulated and so did Adam. In that instant, they lost the moral image of God; they were no longer perfectly holy. They began to sin immediately—Adam blaming God ("The woman you put here with me...") as well as Eve, and Eve blaming the Serpent. In theological terms, their disobedience and consequent loss of God's moral image is known as "the Fall."

The fall of Adam and the loss of God's moral image resulted not only in guilt, but also in moral depravity or corruption. Now his will, which had been totally responsive to God's will, was biased toward evil. Theologians refer to this persistent bent to evil as original sin, an internal drive rooted in the perversity of fallen human nature. Paul called it the sinful nature (or "flesh" in some Bible translations).

The consequences of Adam and Eve's sin went far beyond their own banishment from the garden and the presence of God. God had appointed Adam as the federal head or legal representative of the entire human race. Consequently, his fall brought guilt and depravity on all his descendants. That is, all people (except Jesus) after Adam and Eve are born with a sinful nature. David spoke of this fact when he said in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David's sinfulness while still in his mother's womb was not in acts of sin committed. He was referring to his sinful nature acquired at conception.

The apostle Paul explained it like this: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Note that Paul's sentence appears to be broken off before he finished his thought. What did Paul mean in saying that "all sinned"? We could easily assume that he was speaking of the individual sins of each of us, but that is not what he had in mind. Rather he was speaking of the fact that Adam was the legal representative of all his descendants. In that sense, what he did, we did. Therefore the consequences of his sin, in terms of both guilt and original sin, fell on all of us.

In Romans 5:18-19, Paul wrote that "the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" and that "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners." It is

clear in Paul's theology that Adam was appointed by God to act on behalf of all his posterity. That is why you and I, like David, were born with original sin, and why we were by nature objects of God's wrath.

Our Sin

The story goes downhill from Adam. Since we all have a corrupt sinful nature, we aggravate our condition by our own individual sins. Every day we sin, both consciously and unconsciously, both willfully and unintentionally. We evangelical believers generally abstain from the grosser sins of society; in fact, we tend to sit wrongly in judgment of those who practice such things. But beneath the surface of our own lives we tolerate all kinds of "refined" sins such as selfishness, covetousness, pride, resentment, envy, jealousy, self-righteousness, and a critical spirit toward others.

Beyond that, we seldom think about the words of Jesus that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ... And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37,39). Have you ever thought about what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind? [...]

To probe even deeper, we must realize that our fallen sinful nature affects and pollutes everything we do. Our very best deeds are stained with sin. Because of this, our acts of obedience fall so far short of perfection, defiled as they are by remaining sin, that they are but as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6) when compared with the righteousness God's Law requires.

If we limit our attention to singular sins, to the neglect of our sinful nature, we will never discover how deeply infected with sin we really are. When David prayed that memorable prayer of Psalm 51, after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered, he traced his heinous actions back to their original cause—his sinful nature acquired in his mother's womb.

You might be thinking by this time, "Why devote so much attention to sin? It just makes me feel guilty. I thought you were going to tell us about the unsearchable riches of Christ." My reason is to cause us all to realize we have no place to hide. In our relationship with God, we cannot plead our Christian duties, as helpful as they may be, or our external morality, as exemplary as it may be. Instead, we must confess with Ezra that "our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

Furthermore, even a deep, penetrating sense of our sinfulness does not do justice to the reality of our predicament. Our need is not to be measured by our own sense of need, but by what God had to do to meet that need. Our situation was so desperate that only the death of His own Son on a cruel and shameful cross was sufficient to resolve the problem.

Many people erroneously think that God can just forgive our sins because He is a loving God. Nothing could be further from the truth. The cross speaks to us not only about our sin but also about God's holiness.

God's Holiness

When we think of God's holiness we usually think of His infinite moral purity. That is correct, but there is more to it than that. The basic meaning of the word holy is "separate," and when used of God it means, among other things, that He is eternally separate from any degree of sin. He does not sin Himself and He cannot abide or condone sin in His moral creatures. He

is not like the proverbial indulgent grandfather who winks at or ignores the mischievous disobedience of his grandson.

Instead the Scriptures teach us that God's holiness responds to sin with immutable and eternal hatred. To put it plainly, God hates sin. The psalmist said, "The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong," and "God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day" (Psalm 5:5; 7:11). Thus we see that God always hates sin and inevitably expresses His wrath against it.

The cross, then, is an expression of God's wrath toward sin as well as His love to us. It expresses His holiness in His determination to punish sin, even at the cost of His Son. And it expresses His love in sending His Son to bear the punishment we so justly deserved.

So in answer to the question, "Why the cross?" we must say God's holiness demanded it as punishment for our sins, and God's love provided it to save us from our sins. We cannot begin to understand the true significance of the cross unless we understand something of the holiness of God and the depth of our sin. And it is a continuing sense of the imperfection of our obedience, arising from the constant presence and remaining power of indwelling sin, that drives us more and more as believers to an absolute dependence on the grace of God given to us through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Relevant Scriptures

John 3:16	<i>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...</i>
Romans 3:23	<i>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God</i>
Romans 5:8	<i>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we...</i>
Romans 6:23	<i>For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is...</i>
Romans 10:9-10	<i>If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe...</i>

Questions for Discussion

- Has there been a time when you really had to come to terms with your sin?
- How does this article change the way you view your life in relation to sin?
- Bridges says, "We cannot begin to understand the true significance of the cross unless we understand something of the holiness of God and the depth of our sin." Would you benefit from understanding more of the holiness of God or the depth of your sin?
- How did the cross bridge a way between our brokenness and God's standard? What does this sacrifice mean to you personally?
- Would you say that you personally know Jesus, who died for you and brings us into right relationship with God?

Next Step

If you haven't met Him yet but would like to, God's free gift of salvation is available to everyone! Take a few moments right now by yourself or with a friend who could pray with you. Read the Relevant Scriptures provided, confess your sins, and acknowledge that you believe Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Congratulations! You have now stepped into the kingdom and family of God! From here, we encourage you to 1) tell a friend who also knows Jesus, 2) get connected with a local community of believers—check us out at xaatuva.com, 3) find a Bible and begin getting to know this Jesus better by reading the Gospel of John, and 4) pray often!

Read and discuss the competency "Salvation: Child of God"!