
The Cross—1

The Cross of Christ is the great dividing point of the history of the world. Beside it, all other world events fall into insignificance. The Cross illustrates the complete divergence between God's way of thinking and acting, and mankind's. What the world calls foolishness is actually God's wisdom in action. While the world says, "Strive to make something of yourself," the message of The Cross is, "Come and die so that you may truly live." This message is "a stumbling block (literally, a *scandal*) to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is an offence to the natural man and his way of thinking. How could an apparent failure—what appeared to be weakness—represent the greatest triumph of good over evil? How could a crucified man be described as "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24)? In this first part of our study of the Cross, we will consider what it means in relation to God, creation, and eternity. In the second part, we will examine what it means to us as individuals.

In the beginning

To discover what the Cross is all about, we must go back to the beginning.

Sin did not begin on earth; it began in heaven when satan, one of the highest angels, fell into rebellion.

Two passages in the Old Testament are suggestive of what happened:

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! [the KJV uses the name Lucifer] How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.

—Isaiah 14:12-15

Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle... You were an anointed guardian cherub... you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you... Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour. I cast you to the ground."

—Ezekiel 28:12-17

If these passages really do describe the fall of satan, we see that he was one of the highest angels, exceedingly beautiful and wise. When he fell it was because of pride and ambition: "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*). God cast him out, and he became "the god (or prince) of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Corinthians 4:4), the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). This same devil was quite within his rights when he offered the Lord Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" if He would fall down and worship him (Luke 4:5-7).

But when he was cast out, it raised a question that must have lingered in heaven: *Was it sufficient for the Almighty to use force to throw him out? Why indeed should God reign, and nobody else?*

Though we know no details, evidently there were other angels that sinned with satan. Some people believe that as many as a third of them fell (based on Revelation 12:3,4). Peter tells us about "the angels that sinned" (2 Peter 2:4), and there is a suggestion in Genesis 6:1,2 that there was some involvement of

fallen angels in the wickedness that preceded the flood. But did those angels that had remained faithful to God wonder about the rightness of it all? Was it possible that more of them could fall later on?

It is clear that the rebellion of satan had in some way polluted the courts of heaven. The writer to the Hebrews, speaking of the tabernacle in the desert, says:

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites [the Old Testament sacrifices], but the heavenly things themselves [needed to be purified] with better sacrifices than these.

—Hebrews 9:23

How were the heavenly things to be cleansed from the smell of rebellion? How was the question mark hanging over God's worthiness to reign to be answered? These questions lie at the heart of the Cross.

The onward march of sin

Later, as we read in Genesis 3, satan transmitted his own corruption to the mind of Eve: "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5; compare Isaiah 14: 14). As a result, she was deceived into sin. Adam, who was *not* deceived, willingly went along with her.

The devil had won a great victory; he had managed to subvert God's highest earthly creation, the bearers of the image of God, and to bring them on side with himself. Another question arose:

If mankind too has come to think that God is not worthy to be worshipped, is He indeed worthy to reign?

The vindication of God

With the fall of mankind—and with them the rest of creation (see Romans 8:19-21)—we might have expected that God would just accept the fact, destroy it all, and start again with a new creation. But would that have solved the problem? If He had done so, there was still the possibility that the new creation could be subverted also. But more importantly, the question of worthiness would have remained unanswered. To begin again would hand satan something of a victory. Even to destroy satan and start again would have left the questions unanswered.

Is God really worthy to reign?

Will there ever be a race of men and women who can prove to the angels that God is worthy?

Although the Cross *does* deal with the sin of the world, although it *does* open to us the possibility of forgiveness and redemption, it has bigger things in view. It is fundamentally concerned with the vindication of God Himself.

Old Testament shadows

God did not destroy everything and start again. He did not give up on His creation. The Old Testament is the story of how He began to work in order to regain and restore creation, and to vindicate His Name. As the Old Testament story progresses, the plan of God is coming to its climax, and that climax is the Cross. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33). During the course of their conversation, the Lord Jesus, "...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets... interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (v.27). The Old Testament abounds in pictures and symbols of the Cross of Christ. Here are some of the things that Jesus would have reminded those two disciples about.

Abraham and Isaac

The Lord chose a man called Abram, an unpromising moon-worshipper. Through many ups and downs, this man grew in faith and understanding, until he came to the ultimate test. When God told him to

offer the son that God Himself had given him (Genesis 22), Abraham obeyed. He had come to a point in his faith where he was convinced that the God who was speaking to him could not fail.

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

—Hebrews 11:19

The Hebrew of Genesis 22:8 can be translated, “God will provide *Himself* a lamb.” Many years later Jesus would say, “Abraham rejoiced to see my day. And he saw it, and was glad.” (John 8:56). It is as though Abraham’s faith pierced through the centuries, and in some way he understood what would happen.

The Passover

As the story goes on, we see a nation chosen, the descendants of that man Abraham. Their captivity in Egypt is illustrative of the bondage of creation to sin and satan. Deliverance came after a mighty battle between the Lord and the forces of darkness (Exodus chapters 7 to 10). Finally there came the last plague on Egypt – in the midst of a darkness that could be felt (Exodus 10:21), the death of all the firstborn, and “a great cry in Egypt” (12:30).

The Israelites were spared, but only on condition that they obeyed the Lord’s instructions:

1. removal of leaven (yeast) out of their houses for seven days (12:15)
2. the slaying of a lamb for each household (12:21)
3. the sprinkling of the blood of the lamb on their doorposts and lintels (12:7)
4. the eating of the roasted lamb (12:4-11)

Any Israelite who disobeyed would have suffered just as the Egyptians did.

These stipulations are extremely suggestive. Leaven in this instance is suggestive of sin, and its removal signifies a true repentance (see 1 Corinthians 5:7). The lamb speaks of the death of a substitute – the lamb took the place of the firstborn. The sprinkling of blood is suggestive of the cleansing of sin (for hyssop, see Psalm 51:7). The eating of the lamb indicates complete identification – see John 6:51-57.

Even the death of the firstborn itself reminds us of the spiritual death of Adam that came as a result of satan’s intrusion. (In Luke 3:38 Adam is called “the son of God.”)

The Passover was a new beginning (12:2). The nation was “born again” (and passed through the water), set free to serve God in purity and holiness. The symbolism in these events is most significant. No wonder Jesus chided Nicodemus, “the teacher of the Jews,” with not understanding (John 3:10).

The Levitical offerings

Later, in the wilderness, God ordained a system of sacrifices that are full of foreshadowings of the Cross. They are described in the first six chapters of Leviticus.

Chapter 1—the burnt (or ascending) offering. See 2 Corinthians 2:14,15, where Paul speaks of the “aroma of Christ”. See also Ephesians 5:2.

Chapter 2—the meal (or grain) offering, offered with “the salt of the covenant” (v.13).

Chapter 3—the peace offering. See Ephesians 2:14.

Chapters 4 and 5—the sin offering, for sins committed unintentionally. Note that the offering was burned outside the camp. Compare 4:12,21 with Hebrews 13:11,12.

Chapter 6—the guilt (or trespass) offering, for intentional sin.

All these offerings speak of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for sins.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement, described in Leviticus 16, is in some ways one of the greatest symbols of the Cross. In other ways it is entirely different. On this one day of the year a bull and two goats were brought to the priest. The bull and one of the goats were killed as a sin offering (v.9). The priest went

into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the bull, and then the blood of that first goat, and sprinkled the blood on the mercy-seat as an atonement (literally, a covering) for sins (v.14,18,19). Then the priest laid his hands on the head of the other goat – the “sin-bearing” goat or “scapegoat” – and confessed the sins of the people (v.21). They then sent this goat away into the wilderness, symbolizing the “taking away” of sins (v.22).

Notice that the bull was a sin offering for the priest himself (v.11), while the goat was for “atonement... for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins” (v.34).

The book of Hebrews compares the Levitical offerings and the Day of Atonement with the offering of Christ on the Cross. For example:

Leviticus	Hebrews
The priest died, and his priesthood ended.	Christ is a priest for ever (Hebrews 7:17,24,25).
The priest was consecrated without an oath.	Christ is consecrated with an oath (7:21).
The priest went into the holy place only once a year.	Christ has entered once for all (9:12).
The priest offered the bull for his own sins.	Christ had no sins of His own.
The priest offered the blood of animals.	Christ offered His own blood (9:12).
The offerings purged the flesh only.	Christ’s offering purges our conscience (9:13,14; 10:2,22).
The offerings were made repeatedly.	Christ offered one sacrifice for ever (9:25,26; 10:12).
The offerings could only cover sins, not take them away.	Christ’s blood takes away sins (1:3; 10:4).

Other comparisons could also be made between the Day of Atonement and the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The most important difference is in the temporary nature of the Day of Atonement. Sin was only covered, not taken away. That is why the New Testament *never* uses the word “atonement” (except for a mistranslation in the KJV of Romans 5:11). Instead, the New Testament talks about “reconciliation.” In our study of the covenants, we mentioned that Old Testament thinking needs to be purged from our minds. Here is a case in point!

The serpent in the wilderness

Another great illustration of the Cross is in the story of the fiery snakes that bit the Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 21:5-9). The remedy was for Moses to make a similar snake out of bronze, and set it on a pole in the midst of the camp. Anyone who was bitten had only to look at the bronze serpent in order to be healed. The story reminds us of the garden of Eden, and the poison of satan and of sin that entered and then permeated the human race.

This story illustrates one of the most important aspects of the Cross—that of *identification*. The remedy was identified with the disease—a burning fiery serpent made of bronze, burning in the sun. It was the same with the lamb at the Passover; when an Israelite ate the lamb, it *became* him. When the priest laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, he was *identifying* the people with it. In a sense, the priest *made the goat to be sin* for them.

Jesus applies this principle of identification to Himself (John 3:14; 12:32). What does it really mean when He is lifted up on the Cross, like the serpent set on a pole? Is He *becoming* our sin? Is He becoming *me* on the Cross? Paul says as much in 2 Corinthians 5:14,21.

Notice that when you read John 12:32, the verse before it speaks of the devil being “cast out.”

Isaiah’s “suffering servant”

In the book of Isaiah there are several songs of the “suffering servant” – see, for example, chapters 49:1-9; 50:4-7; 52:14,15; and pre-eminently chapter 53. Isaiah does not identify the “suffering servant,”

and there are suggestions that he is a metaphor for the nation of Israel itself. However, when we come to chapter 53 it is clear that it is a description of the suffering Messiah, Jesus Christ. In Acts 8:26-35 the Ethiopian was reading Isaiah 53:7,8 and wondering who it referred to. Philip explained to him that it referred to Jesus (v.35).

Note again the theme of identification: “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (v.6).

The New Testament reality

“You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21). So the angel described the coming of the Son of God.

Thirty years later, John the Baptist caught sight of Jesus as he walked, and cried, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29,36). What was John thinking of when he called Jesus “the Lamb of God”? Possibly of the Levitical offerings, or the Day of Atonement—but they speak of bullocks, heifers, and goats rather than lambs. It is more likely he was thinking of the Passover.

The hour

Throughout His years of ministry, the Lord Jesus often referred to “the hour” or “my hour.” At first we are told that His hour had not yet come (John 2:4; 7:6,30; 8:20). But the time came when He knew that it *was* come (John 12:23-33; 13:1; 17:1). Take particular notice of John 12:31 – “*Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.*” He is obviously referring to satan. Immediately before the Cross, Jesus is not thinking about victory over sin, or your salvation or mine, but of the casting out of the devil. But “cast out” of what or whom?

According to Job 1:6-12 and 2:1-7, satan had access to the presence of God, and was able to talk to Him on what appears to be almost an equal basis. Perhaps this was a concession granted to him as a result of the “questions” that still hung in the air. Whatever the reasons, God in His wisdom allowed him to come and go with the pure angels.

If we have understood correctly, in John 12:31 Jesus was talking about the final banishment and destruction of satan—the final answering of those questions, and the final cleansing of heaven. There is much more at stake here than the forgiveness of our sins.

The questions answered

Having set the scene and seen something of the issues that were at stake, we see the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as the final resolution of those questions that had arisen in heaven.

Is He worthy to reign?

Does God indeed reign by virtue of power alone? Part of the answer to that question is in Philippians 2:5-11. Christ “made himself nothing” and “humbled himself.” His exaltation is not because He is most powerful, but a result of His humbling Himself (note the “therefore” in v.9).

In Revelation, John gets a glimpse into heaven. It is instructive to see the progression in what he describes:

In Revelation 4 John is brought into heaven (v.1) and sees God sitting on His throne (v.2,3). Around the throne are twenty-four elders seated on thrones (v.4), and four living creatures. Who are these creatures? They are angelic powers similar to those seen by Isaiah in the temple (compare 4.8 with Isaiah 6:1,2). The twenty-four elders fall down and worship God, crying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, *for you created all things*, and by your will they existed and were created.” Their song is about the *power* of God.

In chapter 5, however, John weeps because nobody was found *worthy* to open the scroll (that is, to reign over and decide the future of heaven and earth). But then:

*One of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain... And he went and took the scroll... And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang **a new song**, saying, "Worthy are you."...Then I looked, and I heard... the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!"*

—Revelation 5:5-14

What a picture! Now the angels worship God, not because of His great creative power alone, but because "you were slain, and *by your blood you ransomed people for God* from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (v.9,10). It is a *new song*. Now they sing, not only of His power, but also of His redeeming love.

*My song is love unknown, my Saviour's love to me,
Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.
Oh who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh, and die?
—Samuel Crossman*

Most of the rest of Revelation is the description of what happens as the book is opened. But finally we see the complete restoration of all things: the final destruction of satan (chapter 20); the destruction of sin and death; a new heaven and a new earth (chapter 21); a new garden, with the Tree of Life available to all who want to take of it; the end of sorrow and pain; and the Lamb reigning in glory (chapter 22). The question is answered: He *is* worthy!

The cleansing of heaven

As if that were not enough, we also see the cleansing of heaven itself described:

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

—Hebrews 9:23,24

We know little of this except that it was necessary, and that in His ascension the Lord Jesus accomplished this too. No doubt this also means that from this point on, satan no longer has access.

A new race of people

The devil must have thought that he had won when he subverted Eve and then Adam. The human race, God's greatest expression of Himself, had been turned against Him.

But in the Lord Jesus we see the New Man. He resolutely refused to go His own way, but remained faithful to the Father, even in the extremity of death and abandonment. We cannot know what pains He bore; but we do know that He committed Himself to His Father in faith that He would raise Him up.

But it does not end there. Christ is not the only Man to honour God in this way. He is “the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18). He is “the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29). He is “the firstfruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20,23), to be followed by all those who belong to Him. Yes, there *will* be a race of men and women who will gladly proclaim, “God is worthy to reign!”

Paul spells this out even more clearly in Ephesians 3:8-11.

*To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that **through the church** the manifold wisdom of God might now be **made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places**. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Notice what he is saying:

1. God had a plan from the beginning that even the angels did not know about.
2. He is going to show off His church to the angels (and perhaps to the devil too) as a race of men and women who have loved Him and worshipped Him.
3. This was an eternal purpose agreed between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Our part in this is not just to be saved or to be holy, but to be a testimony to the angels that the God whom we serve is worthy of all our love and adoration. Some of us will have come through great sorrow and hardship, but we shall all testify to the goodness of God even in the midst of it.

How did He do it?

How did Christ accomplish all this? The Cross was certainly *not* just a reaction to a plan that had gone wrong—a kind of “Plan B.” It was agreed before the foundation of the world by all the Persons of the Godhead (Ephesians 1:4,9,10; 2 Timothy 1:9,10).

The Cross was the re-statement of something that has always been true in God. Christ has always been the Lamb of God. He is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 1:19,20). It appears that within the Godhead, the eternal Son always lays down His life for His Father, and the eternal Father always grants Him new life. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He said, “The living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father” (John 6:57). Perhaps these are “the everlasting burnings,” the “consuming fire” (Isaiah 33:14; Hebrews 12:29), the love that overcomes everything.

Conclusion

We have yet to see what the Cross means in terms of *our* salvation from guilt and from sin. But it has implications far beyond our salvation. It has to do with the honour of God. It is a demonstration to the angels and to men of the love and power of God. It is the proof that *He is worthy* to sit on the throne. In the words of the apostle, when speaking of “the good news of God”:

The gospel of God... in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to... the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed...according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

—Romans 1:1,17; 16:25-27