

SALVATION 02

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. An 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 (see Matthew 27:45,51-53).

Three days after His death Jesus arose from the dead and, over a period of forty days appeared to His disciples on numerous occasions-at one time, 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. It plays a prominent role in the architectural design or furnishings of many church buildings. Christian chaplains in the armed forces wear it on their uniforms as the badge of their office. It has been stylized into various articles of jewelry and is often set with precious stones. Many times such jewelry is worn simply for its beauty by people who have no idea of its significance.

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 God, by whom all things were created and for whom all things were created. (See 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 instance 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 (called the 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? I don't think any of us can fully plumb the depths of that commandment, but following are some obvious aspects:

Test #1 – Loving God with everything :

- Your love for God transcends all other desires (see Exodus 20:3).
- Like David, you long to gaze upon His beauty and seek fellowship with Him (Psalm 27:4).
- You rejoice in meditating on His Word, and, like Jesus, you rise early to pray (Psalm 119:97, Mark 1:35).
- You always delight to do His will, regardless of how difficult it may be (Psalm 40:8, NASB).
- A regard for His glory governs and motivates everything you do- your eating and drinking, your working and playing, your buying and selling, your reading and speaking – and, dare I mention it, even your driving (1 Corinthians 10:31).
- You are never discouraged or frustrated by adverse circumstances because you are confident God is working all things together for your good (Romans 8:28).
- You recognize His sovereignty in every event of your life and consequently receive both success and failure from His hand (1 Samuel 2:7; Psalm 75:6-7).
- You are always content because you know He will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).
- The first petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be your name," is the most important prayer you pray (Matthew 6:9).

This description of the Great Commandment is obviously incomplete, but it is sufficient to show us all how woefully short we come in obeying it.

Now let's take a look at what Jesus called the second commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Among other things this would mean:

Test #2 – Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself:

- You cherish for your neighbors the very same love that you bear toward yourself.
- In your dealings with them you never show selfishness, irritability, peevishness, or indifference.
- You take a genuine interest in their welfare and seek to promote their interests, honor, and well-being.
- You never regard them with a feeling of prideful superiority, nor do you ever talk about their failings.
- You never resent any wrongs they do to you, but instead are always ready to forgive.
- You always treat them as you would have them treat you.
- To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13:4-5, you are always patient and kind, never envious or boastful, never proud or rude, never self-seeking. You are not easily angered and you keep no record, even in your mind, of wrongs done to you.

Do you begin to grasp some of the implications of what it means to obey these two commandments? Most of us don't even think about them in the course of a day, let alone aspire to obey them. Instead we content ourselves with avoiding major outward sins and performing accepted Christian duties. And yet Jesus said that all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Even in the so-called gross sins, we often resort to euphemisms to mitigate their severity. I sat with some friends across the table from a Christian leader who said, "I have had an affair." Of course we all knew what he meant, but I later wished I had had the presence of mind to say to him, "Bob, look me in the eye and say, 'I have committed adultery.'" We need to call sin what the Bible calls it and not soften it with modern expressions borrowed from our culture.

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 single 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 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.