

Salvation – The Power of the Cross

Session I

Introduction – The Centrality of the Cross

The fundamental and foundational doctrine of our Christian faith is our salvation - God's forgiveness of our sins which he freely offers to us in His grace and mercy through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. But, although this forgiveness is freely offered to us, it was very costly to God. It was bought at the price of the sacrificial death of Christ, God's only Son, on a Roman cross. Theologians call this whole process the atonement.

Atonement sounds like a rather technical term, although it makes more sense if we break it into three parts – at-one-ment. That's actually indicative of the origins of the word, which derives from the middle English "at onement", or "in unity". The dictionary definition of 'atonement' is "satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury" or "reconciliation". As we've just seen, in terms of Christian theology, 'atonement' is usually taken to mean the forgiveness of sin and the resultant reconciliation of God and mankind achieved through Christ's death on the cross. Christ has restored us to being 'at one' with God.

So you see, the secular definition and the Christian theological definition of 'atonement' are in harmony. But we do need to think about the issues of 'the necessity for Christ's death', 'satisfaction' and 'reparation' – why Christ had to die and how the atonement 'satisfied' God in relation to our sins. We're going to look at these and other issues surrounding the atonement over the course of this series on salvation.

As I said a moment ago, the atonement and the cross are central to Christianity. Do you know the famous painting by Holman Hunt depicting Christ's carpenters workshop in Nazareth. Stripped to the waist, Jesus stands by a wooden trestle on which he has put down his saw. He lifts his eyes towards heaven and the look on his face is either one of pain or ecstasy or both. He stretches raising both arms above his head. As he does so the evening sunlight streams in through the open door, casting a dark shadow in the form of a cross on the wall behind him. From Christ's birth to his death the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. As we shall see a little later Christ was always well aware that His mission was to die on a cross in accordance with His Father's will.

For this reason, the cross is the most important symbol of Christianity. Every church has the cross prominently displayed near the altar and also frequently attached to the exterior of the church building. Yet death on a cross – crucifixion – is probably the most horrible form of death ever invented by man and Christians are the only people ever to have spoken well of it. It was so horrible that in Jesus's time Roman citizens were exempted from crucifixion. Certainly, the ancients ridiculed Christians for their belief that God's anointed died in this way – especially the Jews who believed that those who died on a tree or a cross were under God's curse:

"you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance." (Deuteronomy 21:23 NIV)

The fact that Christians have stubbornly refused to discard the cross as a symbol can only mean that they regarded the crucifixion as being of the greatest importance. Why? – because the amazing sacrificial death and glorious resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ

are indeed absolutely central to our Christian faith. The importance of the cross is reflected in the importance that Scripture gives to the death of Jesus Christ – an indication of which is given by the fact that the Gospels devote almost 40% of their total material to accounts of the final week of the life of Jesus. Christ himself knew his mission and taught the disciples plainly about from the time he gathered them at Caesarea Philippi:

“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” (Mark 8:31-32 NIV)

and again as he was passing incognito through Galilee:

“..... He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."” (Mark 9:31 NIV)

and for a third and final time as he approached Jerusalem for the last time:

“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."” (Mark 10:32-34 NIV)

There are numerous other occasions in the gospel accounts when Jesus alluded to his death.

Probably Jesus knew of this mission by direct revelation from his Father, but he also believed that he must fulfil the destiny predicted for the Messiah in OT scriptures such as Isaiah chapters 52 and 53:

“See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him— his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness— so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life

unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 52:13-53:12 NIV).

Christianity is Christ, and the crucial fact about Christ is His passion on the cross. Christ’s example, teaching and miracles mustn’t be neglected, but His atoning death is absolutely crucial. Indeed our English word ‘crucial’ comes from the Latin crux or cross. Christ’s death is the basis of every spiritual blessing:

“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32 NIV)

and John tells us that we will sing the praises of the Lamb who was slain throughout eternity: “And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped.” (Revelations 5:9-14 NIV)

Paul stated that in his teaching he would know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1Corinthians 2:1-2 NIV)

Immediately after the resurrection the disciples did not possess a full doctrine of the atonement, although we can see the beginnings of it in Peter’s sermon immediately after the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost:

“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "‘The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your

feet." "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:21-36 NIV)

and by the time Paul was writing his letter to the Romans the doctrine was fully developed: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—" (Romans 3:21-25 NIV)

Yet, to non-Christians the cross is foolishness, an offence and a stumbling block. In the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 23, the cross is a stumbling block to many and again as Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 18 the cross is foolishness to many but the power of God to us who are being saved. If we are to advance in our Christian faith, we must leap over the stumbling block of the cross and see beyond its apparent foolishness. As P T Forsyth wrote, "You do not understand Christ till you understand his cross".

Christ was sent to the cross by the opposition of the Jewish leaders, by the betrayal of Judas and the condemnation of a weak Pontius Pilate, but more importantly because he knew he must fulfil his destiny in accordance with His Father's will.

A wicked Judas betrayed Christ to a Jewish leadership who wanted to do away with him. This venal Jewish leadership sent an innocent Christ to the Romans to be tried on false charges. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate believed that Christ was innocent, but allowed the Jewish leaders and the crowds they stirred up to pressurise him into condemning a man he believed to be innocent. So an innocent Christ was condemned to be crucified.

Yet these human factors were not the real reasons behind Christ's crucifixion. Christ had willingly, even determinedly, gone to the Passover festival in Jerusalem knowing that he would die there, because he knew that this was his mission and his Father's will for him. Christ knew that he must die for us, for the forgiveness of our sins, he made that abundantly clear at his final meal with his disciples, the Last Supper. He said: "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28 NIV)

Christ is saying that his blood is to be shed for the forgiveness of our sins, to usher in the new covenant which had been promised by Jeremiah:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:31-33 NIV)

Christ also made it clear that to benefit from his sacrifice we must be participators in this new covenant:

“Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” (John 6:53-55 NIV)

That doesn’t mean that we are saved by or through the Eucharist, but that we need to partake of his sacrifice by communing with him in true faith. We’re saved from our sins through Christ’s death on the cross and appropriating that sacrifice to ourselves through faith in Christ.

What could speak more loudly of the centrality of the Cross to our Christian faith than that.

John puts it beautifully in chapter 3 of his gospel and also links the cross to the OT:

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (John 3:14-18 NIV)

You’ll remember that when there was a plague of serpents during the Israelites journey to the Promised Land, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole so that all those who looked upon it would be healed from their snakebites. Here, John’s saying that Jesus must be lifted up on the cross and die there, in order that those who accept his sacrifice by believing in him may have eternal life.

Of course, there’s a lot more to the cross than I’ve been able to even touch on this morning and next time Chris is going to look at the issue of sin and why Christ had to die on that Roman Cross in order that our sins might be forgiven.

Questions

1. What is the atonement?
2. These days we have become used to the cross as the symbol of our Christian faith, but it was a rather surprising choice for the early church. Why was this?
3. We saw earlier that Jesus's understanding of his death was based (at least in part) on Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Looking at this passage what does it tell us about the mission of the servant and what he was to do?
4. How did Jesus know that his death was inevitable?
5. Did Jesus know that he would die on the cross before his last visit to Jerusalem?
6. How did Peter first show his appreciation of the importance of Jesus's death?
7. What sent Christ to his death on the cross?
8. Why did Pilate send Jesus to be crucified? In what ways are we like him?
9. Why were important elements of the Jewish establishment so opposed to Jesus, to the extent that they wanted him dead?
10. What does the Last Supper teach us about how Jesus understood his coming death?
11. What's the significance of the Last Supper being held during the Passover Festival?
12. Does the church today place the cross at the centre of our faith? If not, why not and how could it be more central? What about us as individuals – how central is the cross in our lives?
13. What do our studies so far show us about the significance of sin, God and salvation?