

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 (Deuteronomy 21:23).

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)

Probably he 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)

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".

But, why did Christ have to die? That's the question we're going to look at in a moment.

Why Did Christ Die? The Need for the Cross

In exploring the need for the cross, we firstly need to look at the pervasiveness of human sin and our inability to deal with it alone and then we need to look at why this sin is so serious from God's point of view.

Our rebellion, our sin – for rebellion against God is a sin – began at the dawn of human history when the first man and woman deliberately rebelled against God by disobeying the one commandment he had given them to obey. As the Roman politician Cicero asserted "Man is a disaster" or as the Puritan Joseph Alleine wrote "O miserable man, what a deformed monster sin has made of you! God made you 'little lower than the Angels'; sin has made you little better than the devils." Even though man was made in God's image (Genesis 1:26), man not only had the capacity to sin, but lost no opportunity in exercising it!

Mankind never recovered from their rebellion and God's reaction to it, often referred to as 'the Fall'. Following the Fall, the intimate relationship between man and God was broken, the orderly relationship between mankind and the rest of creation was broken, and sin was set loose in the world. Scripture teaches us that this sin of the first man and woman was inherited by all their descendants (Romans 5:12-19). As Calvin said "All of us who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin." Before the Fall, man was able not to sin and die, but after the Fall man could only sin and die. The account of the Fall in Genesis chapter 3 teaches us that God does personally and actively punish sin. I also believe that the effects of the Fall reverberated backwards in time as well as being felt forwards in time following the Fall. In modern terms the Fall was a "tipping point" – a small action which brought about huge consequences.

This release of sin into the world did not take long to produce widespread and serious results. One of Adam's children, Cain, killed his brother, Abel (Genesis 4:8), and the world's first

murder was enacted. God's plan for the union of one man with one woman was also broken as polygamy was introduced by Lamech (Genesis 4:19). Vengeance and revenge rather than God's mercy were espoused – also by Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24). Indeed man's evil soon became so great that “every inclination of the thoughts of [their] hearts was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5) and thus God decided to wipe out mankind entirely (Genesis 6:7), apart from a few righteous persons – Noah and his family (Genesis 6:8-9,18). God brought his judgement in the form of a flood, from which only Noah and his family escaped.

This cleansing of mankind through the flood was not effective to eliminate sin. The remainder of the OT ‘testifies’ to the fact that mankind was (and is) utterly unable to recover from the effects of the Fall and to overcome sin by our own efforts. Time and time again, the Israelites sinned and broke their solemn covenant with God. Indeed when the OT ends Israel is still looking for the final consummation of their covenant hopes – when hope would be fulfilled and promise would become fact. Those hopes were only realised in the incarnation of Christ.

If we're honest we all know that we sin, each and every one of us. For as Jesus said looking lustfully at a woman is equivalent to committing adultery (Matthew 5:28) or just being angry with someone is a sin (Matthew 5:22). As Paul said we have all sinned (Romans 5:12). And we need to remember that God's standard is not that 10% of sin or 1% of sin in our lives is acceptable. God won't accept even the smallest amount of sin. As James said if we break any of the law we break all of it:

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” (James 2:10)

As John said we are just not able to live our lives with out sinning:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8).

No sin at all, not even the smallest, tiniest element of it is acceptable to our God.

Given this background I hope you can see the necessity for a radical plan to deal with the sins of mankind. A plan which would not depend on our efforts, but which would be grounded solely in God's loving forgiveness – his grace. But why did that application of grace have to involve the brutal death of God's son – Jesus Christ – on a Roman cross?

Now, sin is a rebellion against God's laws and a law which has no sanction against breaking it is no law at all. It is inconceivable that God's moral laws could be of that kind. The sanction against breach of these moral laws, in other words the sanction against sin, is death. In the words of Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death”. This does not mean that God's laws are mechanical, they are alive in God - a part of his nature - and that unchanging nature makes them unalterable. Although God in His absolute love wanted to forgive us our sins, His wrath at our sin and his absolutely just and righteous nature meant that he couldn't just forget about our sins. He couldn't just sweep them under the carpet as it were. All the aspects of God's nature are absolute and unchangeable. He is absolutely loving BUT sin does arouse His wrath and also he is absolutely just and righteous. God acts in accordance with ALL of his attributes ALL of the time. The problem of forgiveness was not in the world, it was within God. Thus, we couldn't just be let off or forgiven by God, either we or someone else had to pay the price of all the sins of mankind.

However, only a man who was completely without sin could pay the price that our sins deserved in our place. Only Jesus, a unique figure, who was wholly God and entirely without sin, BUT also wholly man and thus completely identified with us, could pay the price for

these sins in our place. God sent him, and he willingly went, to pay that price on the cross. The cross was always God's ultimate plan for dealing with human sin and rebellion.

It's true that human agencies were involved in Christ's death. He was betrayed by Judas, he was sent to Pontius Pilate by the Jewish leaders who invented false charges against him and Pilate eventually condemned him to be crucified even though he clearly believed Christ to be innocent (Luke 23:5-12; Luke 23:16, 22; Matthew 27:24) when the Jewish leadership whipped up the crowds to demand Christ's crucifixion. But, scripture makes it completely clear that Christ went willingly to the cross (John 10:11, 17-18) in fulfilment of God's salvation plan for mankind conceived before the creation of the world.

God in Christ has borne our sins and died our death to set US free from sin and death. The reason for the cross is that you and I, indeed each and every one of us, are all sinners (Romans 3:9-12) and deserved to die for our sins. If you take nothing else away with you from this series then please remember this basic summary – it's the essence of our Christian faith. Only God's grace in sending His son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for the sins of all mankind, to justify us, redeem us and reconcile us to God, has enabled us to recover from the alienation from God brought about in the Fall. By this grace, we are fully spiritually regenerated and restored to bearing the image of God (Ephesians 4:23, Colossians 3:10).

Nevertheless, our salvation as Christians is not confined to merely accepting the Grace of God in the salvific death of Christ. No, salvation is a journey, and a part of that journey is increasing our understanding of our God, his nature and what he has done for us. As Paul said in Philippians 2:12 we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. That doesn't mean that our salvation is *through* works but that we must strenuously work it out to the finish with reverence and singleness of purpose in response to God's grace. So in this series, I'm asking you to take some more steps on that journey of salvation with me and Chris and Alison as we look at the Cross and what was done for us there in much greater depth than I think most of you will have plumbed before. At times, some of the concepts may seem a little difficult, but I think if you stick with this series to the end, you'll find the effort very worthwhile – these things are the foundation of our faith.