

**Series:** The Seven Sayings of the Cross, Part 1

**Title:** The Most Important Subject in the Christian Religion

**Text:** Genesis 2:17-3:24

When the apostle Paul ministered, the cross was at the center of his preaching. He told the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). In this study, we will examine the cross of Christ. Our purpose is simple, we want to give adequate focus to the most important subject in the entire Christian religion. J.C. Ryle, a nineteenth century bishop in Liverpool, said, "As long as you live, be aware of a religion in which there is not much of the cross."<sup>1</sup>

When Paul ministered in Corinth, a great number of people criticized his preaching. It seems they accused him of being boring. They even ridiculed his personal appearance. The apostle made mention of such in his second letter to the church. He said, "It is said, 'His letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak and his public speaking amounts to nothing'" (2 Corinthians 10:10). Paul suffered harsh ridicule and personal attacks in reference to his preaching.

Any preacher can testify of how difficult it is to endure the continual stream of criticism that often accompanies the gospel ministry. Sometimes it can be nearly impossible to stand and share God's Word. Confidence can be lost because of the incessant feedback of the flock. Paul felt such pressure. He knew what it was like to experience preaching paralysis because of the people's analysis. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, he said, "I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling." If we read between the lines, it seems Paul had a hard time preaching to the Corinthians.

Pressures of ministry had made Paul a bit insecure. As he had stood to share God's Word in Corinth, he was visibly affected by the hardship he had experienced. He was fearful and he quaked as he delivered God's Word. The congregation noticed the preacher's nervous ticks and twitches. They regarded his preaching as weak and unimpressive. Other preachers were more bold and engaging, Paul seemed like a novice imposter. The church said, "...his public speaking amounts to nothing" (2 Corinthians 10:10).

With reluctance, the apostle felt the need to defend his ministry. Yes, he certainly didn't fare well in the way of impressive oratory skills. From a physical perspective, his preaching was lackluster. Paul admitted as much (1 Corinthians 2:3). However, the man's preaching was not worth "nothing," as the Corinthians claimed (2 Corinthians 10:10). Though it was physically unappealing, it was spiritually solid. It was weak before the eyes of the world, but it was strong in the eyes of the Lord. Why? Because it was centered on the cross.

The problem with the Corinthians rested in their spiritual immaturity. They weren't mature. With eyes that only saw the physical realm, they were unable to grasp the spiritual richness of Paul's preaching. It is for this reason that Paul later called them "people of the flesh" and "babies in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:2).

Nowadays, some Christians talk about believers who are "too heavenly minded for any earthly good." Such an axiom is intended to describe ascetic Christians who are so strict and somber in their spirituality that they are unable to relate to normal people within the world. The Corinthians did not struggle with such difficulty. In fact, their problem was actually the reverse. They were "too earthly minded for any heavenly good." Later in His letter, Paul would have to rebuke them for incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), unjust lawsuits amongst the church (1 Corinthians 6:1), prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:16), drunkenness at the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:21), a failure to love one another (1 Corinthians 13:1-13), and the abuse of spiritual gifts in public worship (1 Corinthians 14:22). The church at Corinth was a very unhealthy church, yet they felt the freedom to criticize Paul's preaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryle, J.C. *Old Paths: Being Plain Statements on Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 234.

How did Paul respond to such unjust criticism? Well, he struggled in a sense. Feedback made him timid to a degree. Regardless, he didn't shy away from addressing the criticism. In doing so, however, he was careful to not let his ego become the basis of his defense. Instead, he pointed his readers to the cross. He defended the fact that his preaching was centered on the gospel, though it may not have been impressive in a physical sense. Paul wasn't flashy, but he was faithful. That's why he said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

A lesson is found for modern believers in Paul's struggle with the Corinthians. The cross should be at the center of who we are and what we do. It should not be compartmentalized to one sector of our faith, nor should it be regarded as the mere starting place of salvation. The entirety of the Christian religion stands on a hill called Calvary. Christians are saved by the cross, but they are also sanctified and strengthened by it as well. Jesus' work at Golgotha is the means of all strength, security, satisfaction, and steadfastness in spiritual living. If we want to grow in grace, we must keep our eyes on Christ's work on our behalf. Ryle rightly said, "The most advanced Christian can never hear too much about the cross."<sup>2</sup>

When we analyze Scripture, we find Calvary behind every page and line of Scripture. It is found in the Garden of Eden, the Israelites' escape from Egypt, the entrance into Canaan, the sacrifices of the temple, the glorious reign of David, the exiles hope in captivity, and the return from captivity. Sometimes Calvary stands strong in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles, as when Jesus said, "As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). On other occasions, the cross looms in the shadows of Scripture's stories and themes, but it stood strong nonetheless.

All of this instructs us that the cross is to be at the center of our Christianity. If we want to advance in godliness and our commitment to gospel ministry, we must sit at the foot of the cross. It is in gazing on Jesus and His work on our behalf that we are transformed (2 Corinthians 3:18). In this study, we will consider our topic by examining the words of Jesus from the cross. Before we do that, let's introduce our subject by considering five topics related to it.

## **THE NEED**

The first man and woman were made for a forever relationship with God. The Lord fashioned them in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) so that they might relate to Him and reflect His nature. As the Lord God enjoys fellowship amongst the members of the Trinity, humanity was made to enjoy fellowship with God and others (Matthew 22:37-40; John 17:21). Every man, woman, boy, and girl who has ever lived has enjoyed a unique purpose in existing. The Heidelberg Catechism explained this purpose. After asking, "Did God create man thus wicked and perverse?", the catechism replied, "No: but God created man good, and after His own image, that is, in righteousness and true holiness; that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him and live with Him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify Him."<sup>3</sup>

Despite man's inalienable purpose, God's original intent was marred and messed up. At some point near the beginning of time, one of the Lord's highest-ranking angels concocted a plan to rebel against the Lord. Jealous for the fame and glory of the Lord, he boasted, "I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14). But the angel's scheme backfired. The Lord cast him out of heaven. Lucifer, once regarded as a shining star in the Lord's presence, was stripped of his status (Isaiah 14:12; Luke 10:18).

Furious and inane because of his failure to subvert the Lord's righteous reign, Satan lashed out at the crown of the Lord's creation. While the man and woman enjoyed the sweetness of God's paradise, Satan approached. He counteracted the Lord's Law and

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<sup>2</sup> Ryle, 232.

<sup>3</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*. (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 12.

deceived Adam and Eve to sin (Genesis 3:1-5). The Heidelberg Catechism rightfully acknowledged that humanity first sinned by “the instigation of the devil.”<sup>4</sup>

Duped by the bait of Satan, Adam and Eve rejected God’s Law (Genesis 2:17). The consequences were tragic. Instead of becoming like God, as Satan had promised (Genesis 3:5), Adam and Eve experienced shame and separation from God. Wherein they previously enjoyed sweet fellowship with the Lord (Genesis 3:8), they became overwhelmed by a sense of guilt. Turned inward, their souls rebelled against both the Lord and one another.

Things were never the same for Adam and Eve. They were forced to leave the perfect paradise of the Garden of God (Genesis 3:22-24). Why? Because sin cannot permanently dwell in the presence of the holy Lord. The prophet Habakkuk rightfully said, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, and you cannot tolerate wrongdoing” (Habakkuk 1:13).

The consequences of sin did not stop with the first man and woman. They extended to all of humanity. This reality was seen through the lives of Adam and Eve’s two sons — Cain and Abel. The power and presence of sin affected the two men in horrific ways. Cain murdered Abel, revealing his natural propensity to violate God’s holy Law (Genesis 4:1-16; Exodus 20:15).

The cataclysmic fallout from the Garden of Eden has tainted all of creation. Scripture says, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). All are marred and messed up because of sin. Fortunately there is hope. God’s Word says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). The cross of Christ was and is God’s answer to mankind’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

## **THE PLAN**

The Lord was not taken surprise by Adam and Eve’s stumble into sin. He was not caught off guard with no plan of how to remedy humanity’s predicament. Satan may have imagined that he had outwitted the Lord, but the timeless God was completely in control. Before time began, the Lord knew of both humanity’s rebellion and Satan’s role in that rebellion. Consequently, He enacted a plan of salvation.

To fully appreciate the plan of salvation, one must be aware of certain qualities related to God’s character. First, the Lord is transcendent. That is, He is completely separate from and superior to the created order. In addition, the Lord is also eternal. That is, He has no beginning and no end. He has always existed and He always will. No other being can claim these two qualities.

The Lord alone is transcendent and eternal. Because of His nature in regard to these two things, He is not limited to time. He exists outside of it. One theologian has said, “Biblically and theologically, God transcends time, but humans are time-bound creatures until they enter into life after death and exist eternally.”<sup>5</sup>

If you are like me, you may remember the famous trilogy of movies entitled “Back to the Future.” Much was made in those films of the “space-time continuum.” Doc Brown and Marty McFly were able to go back into the past, and travel into the future, because of the way in which the “flux capacitor” circumvented the constraints of time.

We know no human can tweak time. All are time-bound. God, however, is different. He exists outside of time. This part of His nature is important to the cross. The events of Calvary were not a course adjustment on the part of the Creator. He did not nervously respond to Satan’s scheme with a redemptive “Plan B.” No, the events surrounding the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were firmly established in the Lord’s eternal decrees.

Revelation 13:8 speaks of “the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered” as existing “from the foundation of the world.” Before time began, the Lord envisioned man’s sin

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<sup>4</sup> *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 284.

and rebellion and He made a way for redemption and restoration. His plan was so fixed from the beginning of time that the Lord recorded and established the names of all who would be saved via the Son's sacrifice on the cross. From eternity past, the redeemed have been secured in "the book of life" (Exodus 32:32; Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23).

These realities unearth two important realities about salvation. First, the Lord is the Lord of salvation. Satan schemes didn't come first. Man's rebellion did not precede the Lord's grace. Before Satan lashed out at God, and before Adam and Eve transgressed God's Law, the Lord effectively conceived and secured the salvation of His people. The plan of salvation was not a desperate, reactionary measure in response to the evil of the created world.

Second, these things teach us that the souls of the redeemed are absolutely safe. No one and no thing can rip a child of God from the arms of God (John 10:29). Since before time began, the names of the redeemed have been etched in the mind and heart of God. His plan of salvation is strong and secure!

## **THE EVENT**

The cultural leanings of modern society aren't too keen concerning the Lord's plan of salvation. I recently read of one who accused the Christian message of being built upon "Cosmic child abuse."<sup>6</sup> When liberal Christianity began to bloom in Europe and invade the Americas, some labelled a literalist view of redemption as being steeped in "slaughter-house religion."

Some believers may be shocked by such irreverent takes, but to borrow a line from King Solomon — nothing is really new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). At the infancy of the Christian movement, Romans accused the earliest believers of being cannibals. Their slander was a response to the Christian view of redemption. The polytheistic emperor worshippers couldn't understand why anyone would worship a man who died on a cross. Furthermore, the practice of eating bread and drinking wine that symbolized the body and blood of that man seemed zany at best. It was the memorial meal of the Christians' savior that prompted the charges of cannibalism.

Throughout history, the concept of God dying for man has seemed strange and spooky. But is the doctrine of atonement really that illogical? Doesn't humanity seem hardwired with an understanding that there is a God who needs appeasement. A simple sociological study of people groups in human history would reveal that many have held to some form of sacrificial system. Recently, a friend who lives in the Far East showed me pictures of chicken sacrifices from his home village.

Do such things counteract the claims of Christians? Do they prove, as some would maintain, that all world religions are the same? Not hardly. On the inverse, such things verify the presence of our Creator. They give witness that Bible doctrines concerning the justice of God, the sinfulness of man, and the need for appeasement are irrevocable realities. All are hardwired with a sense of shame because of sin. In addition, all possess an understanding that forgiveness and restoration is needed. It is only through the stifling of the conscience that one surpasses this general knowledge of the Creator's realities (Romans 1:24).

What do all of these things tell us about Jesus and His work on our behalf? Because of sin, salvation was needed. The cross was God's answer to man's corruption. As early as the Garden of Eden, the Lord proclaimed that one would squelch Satan's schemes by suffering for man. In Genesis 3:15, the Lord promised, "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." Jesus was the fulfillment of the Lord's promises. Prior to our Lord's birth, an angel told Jesus' earthly Father: "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

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<sup>6</sup> Pink, Arthur W. *The Seven Sayings of the Saviour on the Cross*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 10.

At the cruel cross of Calvary, Jesus endured and experienced the suffering, scorn, shame, and separation from God sin deserves. Though He Himself was sinless, He became sin for His people (2 Corinthians 5:21). He perfectly appeased all of the wrath God has toward the sins of His people. God's justice was satisfied. Though believers were once in a state of alienation and condemnation before God, Jesus secured their pardon. He embraced what they deserved on account of their sin, serving as a perfect substitute and savior. Scripture says, "When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

## **THE RESPONSE**

The cross calls for a response. Such is seen from the pages of Scripture. The earliest announcement of Messiah's birth provoked a response from Adam in the Garden of Eden. Have you ever carefully thought about the verses that followed Genesis 3:15? After God announced that one from woman would crush Satan's head, Adam expressed faith in the Lord's promise. Genesis 3:21 says, "The man named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living." What was the point in Eve's name? Well, Adam knew she would be used by the Lord to bring life where sin had produced death (Genesis 2:17). Her name was appropriate, since her act of child bearing would bring salvation to humanity.

One could think of Adam's act of naming as his confession of faith. Immediately after he applied the new moniker to his wife, the Lord responded to the man's faith. The very next verse says, "The Lord God made clothing from skins for the man and his wife, and he clothed them" (Genesis 3:22). Note that a sacrifice provide covering for the shame of sin. Such a covering was provided in response to man's faith.

The New Testament reveals that faith is the response to the cross that yields the fruit of salvation. Ephesians 2:8 says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift." When the Spirit of God works in the human heart to prompt salvation, faith in Christ is the result. Such faith isn't a mere intellectual belief in God, the person of Jesus, or the historical veracity of the crucifixion. Instead, it is a reliance in the work of Christ on behalf of one's sin. It is a confidence that the cross of Calvary is the means of salvation from the death one deserves.

Such faith is accompanied by a number of spiritual fruits. One is confession. Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." The Greek word rendered "confess" in the original language of the New Testament was a compound word. It was made up of two words. One meant "same" and the other meant "to say." Strictly, the term meant "to say the same thing." It provided a powerful picture of what's involved in the confession that leads to salvation. One is saved when he or she says the same thing about Christ and sin that God would say. Salvation comes to those who accept the Lord's testimony concerning the Son.

## **THE RESULT**

The results of salvation are too many to number. The human mind cannot fathom the riches of Christ's work. Paul was right when he rejoiced in "the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints" and "the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19). Christ accomplished more for His people at Calvary than any pen or supercomputer could ever tabulate. One has said, "Great guilt is answered by great grace. The evil of your sin cannot exceed the value of Christ's blood."<sup>7</sup> Through this study, we will talk about various aspects of Christ's work on our behalf. For now, let's consider a few of the magnificent results of Calvary.

## **Justification**

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<sup>7</sup> The Banner of Truth Magazine 700, January 2022, 16.

Because of Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection, believers experience complete pardon of their sins. They are benefits of what has been called "justification." The act refers to the way in which Christ's substitutionary work renders God's children guilty of their sins and positionally right and righteous before God. The Bible says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Those who are in Christ have a new standing before the Lord. Though He once looked upon them as being defiled sinners worthy of eternal death, He now sees them as being as righteous as His Son.

Have you received the benefits of the cross? Are you in Christ? If you are, know that you are pleasing to God. Before Him, you are holy, just, and righteous. Past failures, the opinions of others, and struggles with indwelling sin do not define you. Because of Jesus, the righteous judge of all the Earth has declared you not guilty of sin and completely righteous before Him.

### **Adoption**

The cross makes God's people His children. All who are in Christ are assured of a family-like standing before the Lord. Scripture refers to this aspect of salvation as "adoption." Paul spoke of the subject in his letter to the Ephesians, saying, "He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One" (Ephesians 1:5-6).

One has defined adoption as "An act of God whereby he makes us members of his family."<sup>8</sup> The theological idea must be understood against the backdrop of the first-century world. In Roman times, adoption was an official, legal act. In a world in which orphans were left to a most-destitute state, it was a great blessing to those who were adopted. Starvation, death, abuse, and slavery were likely the only options for one without parents. The adopted experienced deliverance from such things.

However, adoption also conveyed the sense of blessing. Ones who were brought into a new family were entitled to the same privileges as a biological child. They received a guaranteed inheritance. They had a stake in the estate of their new parents.

Such things paint a beautiful picture of what the cross accomplishes for us. Because of what Jesus did at Calvary, we are rescued from the death and slavery of sin. We are supplied with an illustrious spiritual inheritance. In Christ, we have acceptance and riches for our souls!

### **Regeneration**

The cross also secured a new birth for us. In his preaching, Jesus often talked about this aspect of Christian salvation. When talking to one named Nicodemus, He said, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Regeneration involves the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our souls. Prior to Christian conversion, each of us was little more than a mere empty, physical shell of a human. At the moment of faith, the Third Person of the Trinity invaded the inward part of our human constitution.

The cross had a part in the regeneration of God's people, for it is by the cross that the power of sin and the old man was put to death. This is what Paul meant when he said, "Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Because of what happened at Calvary, you no longer have to yield to sin. Christ is now in you. His presence in your soul can produce His life within your life (John 15:4-5). The cross has indeed brought many blessings to God's people!

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<sup>8</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1235.