

What's So Special About the Cross?
What do Christians honor it?
Lecture Series #5

The cross is often seen in countries where there are Christian churches and Christians. There are also symbols of other religions:

- Lotus flower – Buddhism
- Judaism – Star of David
- Islam – star and crescent of the moon

The cross was a Roman instrument of torture and capital punishment –
John Stott wrote regarding execution by crucifixion:

“It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other non-persons. ...Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, except in extreme cases of treason.”¹

This is how Jesus died, by being killed on a cross.

To understand what's so special about the cross and why Christians honor it, we need some background information that will be helpful in understanding why the cross, more importantly, what it stands for, is so important to Christians.

First of all, we need to understand the nature of God. How do we know anything about him who is invisible? The only way we could know any details about his nature, what he is like, is if he reveals himself to us.

And this is exactly what he has done. He revealed some crucial aspects of his being and his nature in the history of the world to one particular group of people, to one tribe, the ancient Hebrews, who are usually known as “Jews” today.

The invisible God who created the universe and everything in it chose to reveal himself to one particular man who was probably living in the area of the world which we now call Iraq. We believe he was probably a worshipper of the sun or perhaps some other phenomenon in nature, and the eternal God spoke to him (Gen. 12:1-3) and called him to be the founder of a nation of people and one of his descendants who would be born in the future would be the one whom God would anoint with the Holy Spirit and he would be the one who would deliver God's people from their sin and all its consequences.

Later the descendants of Abraham went to live in Egypt to escape famine and ended up remaining there for over 400 years. The Egyptians oppressed them and made slaves of them and God sent a man named Moses to deliver them from slavery. Shortly after they had left Egypt God revealed more of his nature and will to them through Moses. They were given the law of God, who they were to relate to him and to other people, and they were given a pattern for worship which included a way for obtaining cleansing from their sin, primarily by the offering up of animals such as sheep and bulls and goats whose shed blood would provide at least a temporary covering for their sins.

¹ John R. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 23-24.

And what I mean by “sins” are the ways they would fail to keep God’s Law and fail to worship him with the dedication and loyalty that he deserved. They were actually the most blessed of all the people groups of the earth because it was revealed to them not only the nature of God but also they were made aware of what sin is, how they had offended or disobeyed this God, and how they could have their sins covered.

What aspects of his being did God manifest to these Hebrew people?

He revealed to them that he was the Creator of the universe, of the heavenly bodies, and of all the animal and plant life on the earth, including mankind, male and female.

He revealed to them that he was kind and good and he had given them the bounties of the earth, the plants and animals, to govern and use for their benefit. But he also revealed that he was sovereign and his commandments to them must be obeyed. Were they to disobey him, the consequences were great: death and separation from the fellowship with God. And sure enough, in time they disobeyed God and ate from the one tree in the garden of paradise that he instructed them to stay away from. Hence, as rebels against his Kingship, they brought guilt and condemnation upon themselves. But the consequences were even greater because God had appointed them as representatives of the entire human race, so that their sin affected all their descendants.

So even before God called Abraham and he became the founder of the Hebrew people, God had been revealing his nature and will to humankind.

But much more about the nature of God was revealed through these people.

Once God revealed some of the essential aspects of his being to Moses, as we read in Exodus 34:5-8:

⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶ The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, ^[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” ⁸ And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

So we learn from this revelation that the Lord, which is the name of God, and which we sometimes pronounce “Yahweh,” as a God whose nature was to have mercy and to be gracious. These are extremely important aspects of the being of God because as we learn more and more about ourselves and our own nature we discover that we are not such good and innocent people that we thought we were. The more we study the nature of God and the more we learn how pure and righteous he is, how perfect he is in every aspect of his being, the more we begin to see the darkness within our own hearts and minds. In the light of God’s purity we begin to see that our lives are often filled with envy and hatred, with anger and lust and envy, with slander and lying and jealousy, with selfishness and self-glorification, with unconcern for those who are suffering – and what is so condemning to us – we fail to acknowledge God for who he is, we fail to worship him or give him thanks, we fail to love him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and we fail to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. The inner thoughts and motives of humans are often not pretty and it is a good thing that we do not know all the thoughts of those around, or that they know our thoughts – we would all be mutually shocked.

But God knows, he sees all, he knows all, he knows our thoughts before we think them.

So what we see emerging here in the history of God's revelation of his nature to humankind through the Hebrew people is that this God is infinitely more pure and righteous and demanding of perfection on our part than we ever imagined. And we likewise see the sad picture of our own lives – acceptable to those around us, we appear or try to appear as good people to our friends and co-workers, but God sees a different picture in the depths of our being.

To mention just a few more things in this revelation of God to Moses from Exodus 34, we see that he is “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands,⁸ forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”

Again, we learn more of the some of the perfections of God's being: he is steadfast in love and faithfulness and he forgives sin – actually three different words are used to describe humankind's failure to measure up to God's perfect standard: “iniquity, transgression, and sin.” We learn that sin involves such attitudes and actions as disobedience to God, lawlessness, crossing boundaries which he as forbidden us to cross – all this is terrible evil because these are spiritual crimes committed against a God who is holy and pure and righteous and who wills for us to be like him, to imitate him.

But notice also in verse 7 of Exodus 34 that God says of himself: “who will by no means clear the guilty.” So though he is compassionate and forgiving there is this whole issue of guilt before God – of being guilty of sin, of disobeying him, of failing to love and worship him. I am not talking about guilty before the laws of the nation or city or rules of one's culture, but how we all fail to please, to worship, to obey God.

Many people would find these concepts that I am laying out before you as strange and new. They would perhaps think, “I'm a pretty good person. I'm not a thief; I've not murdered anybody, I take care of my family, I work hard at my job.” All these things may be true, but we must realize that we are considering a whole different category of righteousness and failure of righteousness when we consider the holy God and unholy people.

When I use the word “holy” to describe God I am using one of the common words used throughout the Christian Bible to summarize, in a sense, God's nature and being. It means that God is a being of a higher nature than human nature. He is eternal, he has always existed. He is pure and sinless, there is not evil whatsoever in him. It is impossible for God to commit sin or do anything that is not pure and righteous and perfect. He is unique; his thoughts and ways are higher than our thoughts and ways. But whatever his thoughts and ways are they are pure and righteous and without any taint of evil or sin – he is, in other words, holy. He is absolutely holy.

But we are not holy. We have failed to measure up to his perfect standard of righteousness. I am not just giving you my opinion about this; this is what God says about us in his holy, infallible Word, the Bible.

Remember: God looks on the heart and inner motivations of people; he does not just look at the outward appearance and behavior as we do. Listen to God's description of the spiritual condition in *his* eyes of the human race:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:10-19

This is not a flattering description of the inner thoughts, the words, and the actions of men and women. It is rather shocking, but it is a true description of how God sees the human race, how he sees me and how he sees you.

The ancient Hebrews lived among various other tribes who worshipped had absolutely no concept of the holiness and righteousness of Yahweh, of the God of the Hebrews. They knew nothing of the law of God and the high standards of righteousness that he requires of human beings. Hence their cultures were marked by immorality, idolatry and cruelty – sometimes sacrificing their children the fire to their gods.

But the Hebrews were aware of **two great facts** that were unknown to the pagan peoples around them: the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humankind. In short, the Hebrews understood as no other people or tribe on the earth understood, that they were guilty of sin before the Lord, before Yahweh. And they understood that sin was a deadly serious matter, and that sin before God reaped punishment and judgment from him.

The reason they understood that their sin and evil thoughts and ways were an affront to God is because they understood how holy and righteous he was, and they knew that unless some provision, some solution was made for the problem of sin, of their own sins, then they were condemned by God, they were guilty in his court, and they deserved punishment for their spiritual crimes.

It was here that God did not leave them out in the cold, but he provided the system of worship, the pattern of worship, worship rituals, whereby animals would be killed and their blood would be used on their altar of worship to at least temporarily cleanse them of their sin.

Sin against the God of heaven and earth is high-handed rebellion against the righteous King of the universe, and it deserves severe punishment. The Garden of Eden, death come on the human race when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Sin against the holy God is extremely evil, it is more wicked than we can imagine, and we are all guilty of it, we are guilty of it innumerable times. This is not my opinion, this is the Bible’s revelation of our true nature before God. All of us are guilty before God for we have disobeyed him and failed to honor him as Adam and Eve failed to obey him and honor him in the Garden.

Human sin is radical rebellion against God and it requires radical measures to deal with it. The death and shed blood of living creatures, of bulls, and sheep, and goats were required by God in the Hebrew worship practices in their temple so that their sins could be dealt with. The Bible states that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin” (Heb. 9:22). Under the

Hebrew rituals of worship that were given to them by God, animals had to be sacrificed, had to be killed, in order to cover the sins of the people.

But because animals are not of the same category of beings as humans, they are of a lower category, they are not moral creatures, their blood was only a temporary covering for their sins, only a temporary cleansing, not a permanent removal.

The only way that human sin can be removed is for a sacrifice to be made by a being of an equal category – another human being, another moral creature.

And this is where we come to the cruciality of the cross. When I say “the cross” I am talking about the cross on which Jesus Christ of Nazareth died, the instrument of execution of the ancient Roman government upon which he expired.

The sin of humankind is a tremendous problem; the ancient Hebrews recognized this only because God revealed it to them. The other peoples around them didn’t understand this and they continued in their sins, not aware of the great spiritual peril that they were in.

And the problem of the sin of humankind remains the greatest problem on earth. It is not pollution, or the threat of nuclear war, or climate change, or the rising number of deaths in the US from opioids, but it is sin – the sin of the human race.

This sin of ours, you see, brings guilt upon us, it condemns us before a holy God. It means we deserve punishment for our rebellion and our selfishness and our worship and devotion to things, and people, and powers that are not the true God.

Our sin will send us all to hell, to an everlasting punishment of suffering and torment and of separation from the true God and his holiness and righteousness and beauty and glory. The existence of hell shows us how serious sin is, what an affront it is to God’s rulership, and the extremity of punishment that it deserves. The flames of torment in hell never end, they go on forever.

So, is this to be our fate, is this our end, is this where we will spend eternity? Is there no escape from the end that awaits sinners?

This is where the cross of Christ comes to play. The reason we Christians treasure and exalt in the cross of Christ is because here is the answer to our sin and to the judgment of everlasting hell that surely awaits us.

In order to understand the actual historical event of Jesus dying on the cross, let me read you this passage from John 19:17-30:

¹⁷ and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. ¹⁸ There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. ¹⁹ Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.²¹ So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but

rather, 'This man said, I am King of the Jews.'" ²² Pilate answered, "What I have written I have written."

²³ When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic.^[a] But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, ²⁴ so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says,

"They divided my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots."

So the soldiers did these things, ²⁵ but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. ³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

What happened on the cross, the two beams of wood on which Jesus Christ died, is that he became a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of his people. Invisible to the human eye, there was a cosmic spiritual event happening as Jesus suffered on the cross. He received the punishment for their sins that his people deserved. Jesus took their punishment himself on the cross.

How could one man step in and take upon himself the divine judgment and wrath against the sins of his people? A human judge could, we can imagine, allow one man to go to prison or be executed in place of his friend, but one man's offering to be a substitute could not be accepted for more than one person – one life for another. But Jesus died, his blood was shed, for millions of his people over the centuries. How was this possible?

It is because of the identity of who Jesus was. He was a man, yes, but more than a man; he was the Son of God. He was, in other words, God who had come to earth and taken upon himself our humanity, our full human nature. He was, to put it simply and truly, God and man in one person. Therefore, his death on the cross as a substitute for the sins of his people was efficacious for all his people because he was not only man, but he was also God. So his death for sins had the power to be applied to an innumerable number of people.

Listen to this description of Jesus' identity from Paul's letter to the Philippian church in Philippians 2: 6-8:

“...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,^[a] ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,^[b] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus existed in the “form” or nature of God, and likewise he took upon himself the “form” or nature of humanity, so he did not lose his divinity but added humanity to his person, so that he was the God-man, fully God and fully man in one person. And he gave up his life in obedience even to the death on the cross.

The cross of Christ, you see, is the only provision made in the history of the world for human sin. All sin must be paid for, put receive its just punishment. If God did not punish sin and evil, he would compromise his justice and righteousness and cease to be perfect God he is. He cannot overlook sin, not even the smallest sin.

So every sin ever committed by every human being will be justly punished by God. Either I pay for my own sin in an eternity of hell or take Jesus as my Lord and Savior so that he pays for my sin.

Romans 3:22-26 summarizes the great spiritual transaction that took place on the cross:

“... ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction.²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

We see here that all humanity, not matter what century or culture they lived in, are under God's condemnation as sinners and can only be saved from their sins by the work of Christ. The scripture says in verse 25 that Christ was “a propitiation by his blood,” – what this means is that he absorbed the white hot wrath of God that was directed against his people and their sins – Jesus took it upon himself – no wonder he dreaded going to the cross – yet he submitted to the will of God and went.

I think another thing that is being indicated here in verse 25 and 26 is that Jesus “overlooked,” so to speak, that is, he “passed over” the sins committed under the Old Covenant when animals were killed to temporarily cover the sins of the Hebrew people. But now upon the death of Jesus on the cross, God can uphold his righteousness and justice by punishing sin – he punished the sins of his people on Jesus – which I turn enable him to justify, or declare righteous in a legal way, his people because their sins have been removed by Christ's absorbing in himself the punishment that they merited from the holy God who does not and cannot so much as wink at any sin

What happened on the cross of execution outside the city of Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago was a cosmic event that was the most important even in the history of the world. It was there

that God the Father laid on Jesus his Son all the wicked and wretched sins of his people, and then God the Father poured on his fury and wrath against those sins on his own Son.

The ancient prophet Isaiah prophesied the events and the meaning of the death of the servant of Yahweh about 600 years or so before it happened:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
he has put him to grief;^[a]
when his soul makes^[h] an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see^[i] and be satisfied;

by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,^[i]
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,^[k]
 because he poured out his soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet he bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:4-12

We see here from Isaiah's prophecy that it describes so accurately what happened when the Messiah died. It is an amazing description of how the sinless Son of God bore the punishment in himself that was due to his people.

Jesus' death on the cross was no unplanned event or second thought in the plan of God. This was God's plan before the creation of the world. The one God dwelled in perfect harmony in all eternity within himself as a triunity of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – not three Gods but one God, but one God eternally existent in three persons. And he sent his Son to the earth who was born of a Jewish virgin named Mary who had conceived this child through the work of the Holy Spirit.

J.I. Packer's describes the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ in behalf of his people and what it means to them:

“Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do very thing necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory. To affirm penal (that is, having to do with punishment) substitution is to say that believers are in debt to Christ specifically for this, and that this is the mainspring of all their joy, peace and praise both now and for eternity.”²

The cross that we see on churches and that we sometimes wear around our necks is a symbol of the actual cross on which Jesus the Messiah died outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus' death on the cross marked the climax of his suffering the wrath of God which had been directed against his people for their sins. Jesus, who had never committed a single sin, took the sins of his people upon himself and suffered the punishment for them that they deserved. Since Jesus paid for his people's sins, God considers them forgiven, cleansed, and righteous in his sight, not because of their own righteousness, but because Jesus' death on the cross not only effectively pays for all their sins but it also results in his perfect righteousness being credited to them so that God no longer sees their sins but only sees them as righteous, as righteous as Jesus himself.

Since it was by means of Jesus' death on the cross that his people's sins are forgiven, the cross is held in special honor by Christians because it reminds them of Jesus' great suffering of the

² J.I. Packer, “What Did the Cross Achieve?”, p. 25, quoted from John R. Stott, The Cross of Christ

wrath of God against them which they deserved and he did not deserve, but he offered himself up to be a substitute in their place for the punishment that they deserve.

So the cross speaks to Christians of the forgiveness of their sins and the release from punishment for those sins, of the imputation to them of Christ's righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), of reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:9-11), and of the resultant regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4-7) that produce repentance from sin and faith in Christ. Jesus accomplished all this and more when he gave up his life on the cross.

No wonder that Christians treasure and honor it!