

WHAT DOES THE CROSS OF CHRIST REPRESENT?

1. The New Testament authors place a great deal of emphasis upon the cross of Christ:

a. Paul reminded the Corinthians that “when I came to you, I did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. **For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). I have no doubt that this was true of every congregation he visited (1 Corinthians 4:17).



b. Paul told the saints at Corinth that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (both Jews and Gentiles), but to us who are being saved **it is the power of God**” (1 Corinthians 1:18; Romans 1:16).

c. Those who preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified were persecuted by the Jews – these unbelieving Jews were “enemies of the cross” (Philippians 3:18). Many Christians were tempted to swerve into Judaism and keep the ordinances of Moses that they might be exempted from persecution (Galatians 6:12), but others, like Paul, stood firm and were willing to **bear the offence of the cross** (Galatians 5:11).

To whatever congregation he went, Paul was determined to know nothing among them except “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5) because he knew that the preaching of the cross was “the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18b; Romans 1:16). Both unbelieving Jews and Gentiles regarded the message of the cross as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18b), and the Jews especially found it offensive; one of things they found offensive was the teaching that the Law of Moses was taken out of the way and “nailed to the cross” (Colossians 2:14). The Jews persecuted all those that preached Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

d. One of the things that the Jews found so offensive was the teaching that **the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross**. Paul says that God has “taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14).

2. Paul was appointed an apostle to preach “the message of the cross”. The New Testament writers often used “the cross of Christ” as a figure of speech, a synecdoche (“a figure of speech in which a part stands for a whole or a whole for a part” - Doubleday Dictionary), to represent many other things, and in this lesson we shall consider five things the cross of Christ represents.

I. GOD'S HATRED OF SIN (Psalms 45:6-7; cp. 97:10; Proverbs 8:13; Amos 5:15)

Why did Christ have to die on the cross?

1. God created man in His image (Genesis 1:26-27) to have fellowship with Him (1 John 1:1-3), but when we transgress God’s law, we sin, and it is sin that severs this relationship; it separates us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2; Ezekiel 18:20).

2. God is just (Psalms 7:11; Isaiah 45:21) and justice demands punishment, and the punishment for sin is death (Romans 6:23; cp. Romans 2:5-11).

3. However, because of His love for the world, God sent His Son to bear our punishment (John 3:16; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). He Himself tasted death for every sinner (Hebrews 2:9).

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. 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” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

II. GOD’S LOVE TOWARD MAN

How do I know if God loves me?

1. Some people think that God is under some moral obligation to save them from the consequences of their sin – death (Romans 6:23) and eternal damnation (Mark 16:16; Mark 3:28-29). The truth is, though, He is not! We are all familiar with the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: the Lord had heard about the wickedness of these cities and went to see for Himself (Genesis 18:20). When He saw that the cities were very wicked He sent down fiery brimstone and destroyed them (Genesis 19:24-25). Jude says that these cities are “set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 1:7).

2. What, then, motivated God to send His Son to bear our punishment? In a word, love. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

a. This was not a last minute decision, it was something God had planned from all eternity: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know - Him, **being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God**, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:22-23).

b. About seven-hundred years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah foretold of the Messiah's coming and suffering:

"Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely **He has borne our griefs** and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But **He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities**; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. 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**. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; **for the transgressions of My people He was stricken**. And they made His grave with the wicked - But with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When **You make His soul an offering for sin**, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and **He bore the sin of many**, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:1-12).



c. Before Jesus' birth an angel told Joseph: "Do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he cried out, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

d. Early in His ministry Jesus said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15; see Numbers 21:4-9). On His final trip to Jerusalem He reminded the apostles, saying, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

3. If anyone doubts whether God loves him, then he should remind himself that God was under no moral obligation to save man but that He was motivated by love to send His Son to bear our punishment. He should then look to the cross because it is the demonstration, the proof, of God's love: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

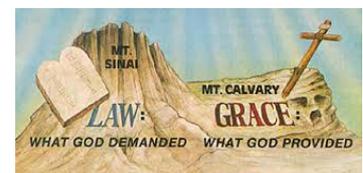


III. THE END OF THE LAW

Are we still under the Mosaic Law?

1. The Law was not given to the fathers of the Patriarchal Age, but to the Israelites at Mount Sinai: “And Moses called all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive” (Deuteronomy 5:1-3). There was no other nation that had God so near to it and no other nation had the Law (Deuteronomy 4:6-8).
2. The Law was never meant to be permanent – This is seen in that:
 - a. The prophet Jeremiah foretold of a day when God would make a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). After the new law had come into force, the Hebrew writer explains, “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:7-13).
 - b. The sacrifices offered under the Mosaic Law could not actually wash away a person’s sins: “For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins” (Hebrews 10:1-2). The writer continues, “But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:3-4). The writer then shows that Christ Himself is the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10:5-8). Thus the old repetitious system was removed to make way for the new (Hebrews 10:9-10). The Jews ought to have seen the need for a perfect sacrifice and realised that, once offered, the old sacrificial system would be abolished.
3. Jesus is the institutor of the New Covenant but, even as men understand, a covenant only comes into force after the death of the testator (Hebrews 9:16-17). The writer then reminds us that “the first covenant was not dedicated without blood” (Hebrews 9:18) and that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22). Thus the death of Christ signalled the abolishment of the Law. Paul says that Christ “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14), and that “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')” (Galatians 3:13).
4. The Old Covenant is described as “a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). The New Covenant is described as “A better covenant, which was established on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6). Contrasting the Old Covenant with the New Covenant, John says, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The emphasis of the Old Covenant was *law* but the New Covenant “emphasises God’s gift of grace in the sacrifice of His Son and the fuller revelation of truth as made known in Christ’s life and teachings” (Daniel H. King, Sr.). It means we are free from the dominion of sin and this ought to cause us great joy: “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

“Those who seek to bind the Law of Moses on Christians today have no appreciation for what Jesus accomplished on the cross” (David Padfield).



IV. THE END OF ETHNIC AND RACIAL BARRIERS

What did Christ's death on the cross achieve regarding the hostility between Jews and Gentiles?

1. Prior to the death of Christ a great hostility existed between Jews and Gentiles. "The Law of Moses created 'hostility' between Jews and Gentiles, but before we jump to the conclusion that God is the author of hatred, we need to realize that this enmity can be traced back to wrong attitudes towards the Law. The Jews tried to twist the Law into saying that all Gentiles were bad. In fact the Pharisees tried to exclude their own people with the Law (John 7:49). And when the Law mentioned the depravity of the cultures surrounding Israel, such a picture was all too true. Paul points out that the 'hostility' existed in the mind of men (Colossians 1:21). Gentiles may have resented the 'exclusive' nature of Judaism, but honesty would have demanded them to admit, that such exclusiveness had existed for good reason (Romans 1:18-32). The Gentile world really couldn't complain about Jewish smugness, because the Jew's may have perverted the Law into saying that all Gentiles are immoral and godless, but many Gentiles only reinforced this misinterpretation by their own immoral lives" (Dunagan).
 - a. But Christ has reconciled both Jew and Gentile to God through His death on the cross and created of them one new body – the church (Ephesians 2:10-16).
 - b. Of course, creating this new body meant the abolition of the law. The cause of the hostility is removed and so the hostility is removed – so now people of all nations dwell together in peace in God's kingdom. This is what Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 65:17-25¹).
2. God is not a respecter of persons, "For there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11). God does not show any partiality in regards to race, but He is a respecter of character! When the Gentile household of Cornelius were baptised in the Spirit, Peter exclaimed, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

V. THE DRAWING POWER OF THE GOSPEL

1. As His death on the cross loomed closer, Jesus said, "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name. Then a voice came from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it and will glorify it again. Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, An angel has spoken to Him. Jesus answered and said, This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, **if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself**. This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:27-33). The message of the cross is that which draws men to Him; it is the message of the cross that converts men. As Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16).
2. If one believes that the message needs to be changed or that we need to introduce worldly amusements to draw people to Christ, then we are really saying that the message of the cross lacks power. The message of the cross is sufficient and it must not be changed or updated, and we must not add or take away anything from the message. The message of the cross is the very foundation of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), which is God's power unto salvation (Romans 1:16). "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Conclusion

1. We asked, "What does the cross of Christ represent?" (i) It represents God's hatred of sin, (ii) It represents God's love toward man, (iii) It represents the end of the Law of Moses, (iv) It represents the end of ethnic and racial barriers, and (v) It represents the drawing power of the gospel.
2. We need to keep what the cross represents in the forefront of our minds, but let us also apply it: hate sin as God hates sin, love as God loves, rejoice in our freedom from the dominion of sin and the grace in which we stand, judge men, not by their race, but by their standing in Christ, and, like Paul, be ready to preach Christ Jesus and Him crucified; knowing that the gospel alone is God's power unto salvation for all who believe.

¹ You might find Homer Hailey's commentary on these verses very interesting and encouraging.