

Ask almost anyone about the central symbol of the Christian faith and they will point to the cross. Throughout history, the cross has featured prominently in church architecture. In some churches, like our own, we have crosses fixed in the sanctuary and on the outside of our building. In Western Europe, there are even a number of ancient church buildings that were designed to be cruciform in shape.

While the cross can be found in public places like the Church, it can also be found in solemn places like a cemetery—all over the world the cross has been used to mark the grave of those who have died. Who could forget the famous lines, penned by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae? “*In Flanders Fields the poppies grow, between the crosses, row on row.*”

Throughout the centuries, the cross has been portrayed by many of the world’s greatest painters and sculptors—Raphael, Rembrandt, and many others. The cross has also been reproduced in a myriad of ways for people to wear—on clothes, on necklaces, in ears, and even tattooed on people’s bodies.

**illus:** Ten years ago I had the privilege of visiting a team of Alliance International Workers in Cairo. I was met by one of the missionaries and his favourite taxi driver, an Egyptian Christian. As we drove, the taxi driver began to tell me a part of his story. In Egypt, your identification papers do more than reveal your name and address—they identify you as either a Muslim or a Christian. Being a Christian

in Egypt affects your place in society and the kind of job you are allowed to hold.

But in spite of the economic and social stigma that Christians face, virtually every Christian chooses to publicly identify themselves by way of a small cross, tattooed on the inside of their wrist. When two strangers meet and shake hands, a simple turning of the wrist will reveal whether one is a Christian or not. When I asked to see the driver’s tattoo, he proudly informed me that he had chosen to tattoo a cross on the top of his hand, that way, everyone could clearly see that he was a follower of Jesus Christ.

Today the cross can be seen in churches, cemeteries, art, t-shirts, jewelry, and even etched on bodies, but it was not always so. In the ancient world, crucifixion was Rome’s most horrific and intimidating instrument of death, power, and control. The Jewish historian, Josephus, referred to crucifixion as “the most miserable...of deaths,” and “the worst extreme of the tortures”.<sup>1</sup> The Roman philosopher, Cicero, referred in his writings to the “terror of the cross”.<sup>2</sup>

It’s ironic that what was once considered the cruelest form of capital punishment came to be one of Christianity’s most important and beloved symbols. The Apostle Paul, wrote the following to a church in the city of Corinth, “*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.*” Paul continues, “*When I came to you, I did not come*

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.203.

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *In Defence of Rabirius*, 5.16.

*with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ—that is, Jesus Christ crucified.”<sup>3</sup>*

The Christian vision is cruciform in nature—the cross is the lens through which we see God, ourselves, and the world. This cruciform vision was embraced, right from the beginning, as the early church grew and developed. A second century theologian, Justin Martyr, went so far as to suggest that God had providentially placed the shape of the cross in everyday objects—the masts of ships, and in tools like the plough, the axe, and the spade—to serve as constant reminders of the cross of Christ.

Everett Ferguson writes, “Christians would often pray standing up with their arms stretched out in the form of a cross. As early as the 200s, Christians were making the sign of the cross with their hands. The cross was so important that pagans charged Christians with worshipping the cross.”<sup>4</sup>

One can easily prove that the cross is central to Christianity, but the deeper question has to do with its meaning. *Why did Jesus die, and, what did His death on the cross accomplish?* To understand the answers to these questions requires both an understanding of our ultimate future, and, an understanding of humanity’s problem. To put it another way, if we can answer the questions, “*what are we saved for?*,” and “*what are we saved from?*,” we are well on our way to understanding what was accomplished at the cross.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/february/when-did-cross-supplant-ichthus-fish-as-symbol-of.html>

**What are we saved for?** Going to heaven when we die is not the New Testament vision of our ultimate future. The biblical vision is much larger. His vision includes the healing of humanity and this world so that heaven and earth can be united. War, famine, disease, and pain will be no more. Humanity will be remade in the image of Christ, and as newly minted image-bearers we will be ready, able, and willing to re-assume our vocation as faithful stewards of creation.

God’s vision will not be fully realized until Jesus returns, but it has already happened in part. Sin’s enslaving power has been broken, evil has been hamstrung, and the power of the grave has been broken. Already we have access to God’s holy presence—we are welcomed as beloved daughters and sons. We can experience the life of the future in the present. Already, in Christ, peace, joy, and love are available. And don’t forget about hope; of all peoples, Christians are people of hope. We live in the joyful anticipation of the Lord’s goodness—today, tomorrow, and forever.

If this is what we are saved for, **then what are we saved from?** Put another way, *if the cross is God’s solution, what problem, or problems, does the cross address?* It may surprise you to hear that throughout the centuries, the church has not had a uniform answer to this question—so much depends on our starting point, and, on how we define “sin”. Let me explain.

Where we start profoundly affects where we end up. If we begin the conversation focused on God as a relational Being who loves the world, then the cross becomes the solution to humanity's broken relationship with God. But if we begin the conversation focussed on God's white-hot-holiness, or His moral perfection, then the cross becomes the means to satisfy His wrath, or, to pardon humanity for breaking God's law. And if we begin the conversation focussed on the ultimate consequence of sin, namely death, the cross becomes the means by which God, in Christ, triumphs over death.<sup>5</sup>

As I said a moment ago, so much depends on our starting point, and, on how we define "sin". A theologian by the name of Scot McKnight puts it in the following way, "The way we define the problem shapes the way we define the solution."<sup>6</sup>

The truth of the matter is that the Bible describes sin in a variety of ways: as *rebellion*, as *infidelity*, as *disloyalty*, as *getting dirty*, as *wandering*, as *breaking God's law*, and as *missing the mark*. Most of us tend to think about sin in a one dimensional way, but the Bible presents sin as a multi-dimensional problem.

Nearly every time the gospel is preached, and the cross of Jesus is mentioned, whether you realize it or not, you are given a particular starting point, and the cross is presented as a solution to a particular kind of problem. I'm not here to tell you that you've been given the wrong starting point or even the wrong definition of sin, the point

I'm trying to make is that the Bible's teaching about the cross is more comprehensive and more wonderful than we know.

My plan is to take the next five weeks to explore five words (concepts), found in the New Testament, that showcase **the wonder of the cross**. The five words are: **reconciliation**, **justification**, **redemption**, **victory (over the powers)**, and **propitiation**. In the time remaining, I will briefly outline these five to give you a taste of what is coming, beginning with reconciliation.

**1. Reconciliation:** Is it just me, or do you find it difficult to convey the concept of sin to people who no longer believe in moral absolutes? In the absence of agreed upon moral absolutes, many Christians are puzzled about how to go about sharing the good news concerning Jesus. The question we often ask ourselves is something like this: *How do I convince my neighbour that he or she is sinful and in need of a Saviour when they don't feel any guilt over breaking God's laws?*

I wonder whether we are leaning too heavily upon a one-dimensional understanding of sin and the cross? I can guarantee that every person we've ever met has experienced the weight of sin's destructive power. I want you to think for a moment about a broken relationship in your life—a friend, a colleague, a spouse, a child, a sibling, a neighbour, a grandparent. One of the chief consequences of sin is broken relationships—when we, or others, fail to listen, fail to love,

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<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> McKnight, 22.

or to serve, relationships break down. We all need to be reconciled to someone, don't we?

*"To reconcile" literally means "to exchange, to bring into a changed relationship."* The cross addresses the broken relationship between God and humanity—God has acted in Jesus Christ to reconcile humanity, and the rest of the cosmos, to Himself.

2 Corinthians 5 says, “[Jesus] *died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*<sup>7</sup>

Through the cross of Christ we are reconciled—saved from enmity, separation, and alienation; we are saved for relationship, union, fellowship.

**2. Justification:** The second word we're going to look at will likely be the primary way that you've understood the problem of sin and the solution the cross provides—I'm referring to the word “justification”. At times the Apostle Paul describes sin as the breaking of God's law, which results in a legal guilt (not simply *feeling* guilty). Justification is a legal metaphor that paints a familiar picture of a court room.

Humanity has broken God's law, falling short of His requirements. There are things we should have done but didn't; there are things we should not have done but did. As a result, we find ourselves in the witness stand, accused, but without any defence—we are guilty as charged before the Judge of Heaven and Earth. But the good news is that at the cross, God, in Christ, has taken the guilt and penalty for our wrong doing upon Himself. In Jesus the righteous requirements of the law have been fully met, and because we are united to Him, we are granted His righteous standing.

Isaiah 1:18 says, “*Come now, let us settle the matter; ' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*” Romans 5:1 says, “*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*”.

At the cross we are saved from legal guilt and we are saved for righteousness—that is, we are given right standing before God and invited into a relationship unobstructed by guilt or shame. Once this takes place, we can rightfully reclaim our original vocation as image bearers and stewards of creation.

**3. Redemption:** The third word is “**redemption**” and I believe this is a word that will resonate with our culture as we communicate the good news concerning Jesus. In the ancient world, “redemption” was primarily an economic metaphor. To redeem something was to loosen something from a bond, to buy back something that had been sold (think pawn shop), to exchange something that was yours for something that belonged to another, or to pay a price to set a slave

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15, 17-18, 20.

free. In the ancient world, redemption was a powerful—and costly—word.

*But how does this word relate to sin and to Christ's death on the cross? At times, the New Testament describes sin in terms of the wrong things that we do, but it also describes sin as an enslaving power or force. In John 8:34-36 Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

I wonder how many of you feel bound, captive, or enslaved in some part of your life? Do you have a secret, or public, addiction? Is there something you can't break free from? If you feel bound to past events or past woundedness, you need to be redeemed. If you cannot let go of bitterness or unforgiveness, you are a captive in need of redemption. If you are being tossed back and forth by your worries, fears, or insecurities, you are enslaved.

Many people no longer believe in moral absolutes—they have utterly rejected the "right and wrong" of God's law—but if we talk about sin in terms of slavery, there is an immediate resonance. People may not see that they need forgiveness, but many people recognize their need for freedom. In turning away from God, all of us are held captive to sin's enslaving power, but the good news is that at the cross, God, in Christ, has broken the power of sin.

We are saved from sin's enslaving power; we are saved for freedom—freedom to love and serve God, freedom to love and serve others, freedom from the compulsions that drive us.

**4. Victory (Over the Powers):** The fourth word is "victory," and the New Testament points to the cross as the decisive moment in which God, through Christ, demonstrated victory over the powers. 16th century theologian, Martin Luther, referred to sin, death, and the devil as the "unholy trinity" and the Scripture bears this out—these three are portrayed as our mortal enemies, out to destroy humanity.

In Ephesians 6:12, Paul said, "*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" When we look to the cross, we see Jesus' victory over this unholy trinity.

I wonder, do you know anyone who was, or is, dying? It can be a terrifying thing to face the great unknown, but there is hope for the Christian when we look to the cross. Hebrews 2:14-15 says, "*Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.*" In dying, Christ swallowed death and broke the power of the grave; in rising, He secured our own resurrection.

**illus:** A number of years ago, my wife heard an unexpected story at work. Naomi is a nurse and at the time she was working in the Intensive Care Unit at Lions Gate Hospital. When she tells people where she works, she often jokes, "*I hope I never see you at work,*" if she does, it means that your body is in terrible distress.

Naomi went to work one day and was talking with a fellow nurse who was just getting off her shift. This nurse, like Naomi, is a follower of Jesus. She said to Naomi, “*You’re not going to believe what happened last night...the doctors and the respiratory therapists are still talking about it!*”

She went on to tell the story of a patient who had been rushed into the hospital the night before. This patient was an 89 year old woman, her health was in rapid decline—in short, she was dying. Her breathing was ragged, her heart was in distress, and the medical personnel were preparing to administer life saving measures—a breathing tube, drugs, the defibrillator.

But before they could begin, in no uncertain terms, this 89 year old woman said, “*Stop! I’m done! I’m going to see Jesus, do you know Him? He’s my King of Kings and Lord of Lords...I’m ready to die!*” Silence filled the room. The doctors didn’t know what to say, but they did honour her request. They stopped, they waited, and a few minutes later the woman died.

“*Stop. I’m done. I’m going to see Jesus. I’m ready to die.*” Was it merely wishful thinking? No. It was the voice of hope—a hope that no doubt had been strengthened through years of knowing and following Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, one day it will be our turn. For now, we live—with faith and hope—entrusting ourselves to the goodness of Jesus, the One who died and rose again.

**5. Propitiation:** The fifth and final word is **propitiation**—try saying that word five times fast. The word “propitiate” means “*to appease, or to satisfy*” and it refers to the righteous anger God feels towards sin and the destruction it causes. Let me ask you, *could God be*

*described as good and loving if He wasn’t angered by sin? If sin corrupts, perverts, abuses, and destroys—whether things or people—could a good and loving God be callous and unfeeling towards such things? No!*

Propitiation is a religious metaphor taken from the sacrificial system. Jesus offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice in agreement with God’s righteous judgement (condemnation) against sin. Hebrews 2:17 says that Jesus was made like us, fully human in every way, “*so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*”

The wonder of the cross is that we have been saved from condemnation/judgement; we have been saved for blessing, love, honour.

These five words—reconciliation, justification, redemption, victory, and propitiation—go a long way towards showcasing the wonder of the cross. As we make our way towards Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, it’s my hope that we will both rejoice and rest in the salvation that has been made available to us in Christ.

**The Lord’s Supper:** This morning we come to the Lord’s Table as people in need. *Who among us doesn’t need to be reconciled? We come to Jesus with all of our broken relationships, beginning with the things we’ve thought, said, and done to break relationship with God.*

*Who among us doesn’t need to be justified?* The good news is that the wrongs we have done, and the wrongs done to us, have been nailed to the cross of Christ.

*Who among us doesn't need to be redeemed? We come to Jesus this morning as those who have experienced captivity and slavery this week. We come with the addictions that binds us, the fear that hounds us, and the unforgiveness that enslaves us. We come asking Jesus to set us free.*

We come as those proclaiming the victory Christ has won. For *“neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers...can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*<sup>8</sup>

And we come humbly, remembering the atoning sacrifice Jesus made for us. *“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”*<sup>9</sup>

## **Worship**

## **Benediction.**

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:38-39.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.