

Cross-Purposes

Volume 1

Bible Studies on the Cross of Christ



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GROUP BIBLE STUDY

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying both to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

PRAY

Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.

ASK

In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:

- 1. Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.
- 2. Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.
- 3. When is the Bible writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.

- 4. What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he also is described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he would be the one who would be the offering for our sins.
- 5. What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?** If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.
- 6. What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the Bible passage within the whole of the Bible.

The Bible is indeed God’s inspired word – it is his revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand the Bible we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we “rightly divide the word of truth”. And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God’s word.

PLAN

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.
2. Think about what you don’t understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask ‘What is the kingdom of God?’, ‘What is a

Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.

3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.
 - a. **Understanding.** The first type of question should be aimed a trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.
 - b. **Significance.** Only when we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.
 - c. **Application.** Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.
- It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.
- As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is, God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.
- Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Let us not forget:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Our theme is 'The Cross of Christ'.

Set out in this booklet are the passages which we will study together. The universal symbol of the Christian faith is the cross. In our studies we will aim to get behind the significance of the cross, so as to begin to grasp its meaning and importance to the life of the Christian.

To help us in our studies, I am recommending one book in particular which I hope will enable us to get to the heart of the cross. The book is John Stott's 'The Cross of Christ' published by IVP. It is a Christian classic, available at Amazon for £7.99.

Introduction

The central principle of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the cross. It is here that the fundamental problem of man is resolved: the problem of how man may know God and enter into a relationship with him. God's chosen solution to this problem is his son Jesus Christ and his death upon the cross.

Christianity is Christ, and unless we understand the death of Christ we cannot fully appreciate why our Lord came into human history! You see, the death of Christ is at the heart of forgiveness of sins and leads us to salvation. In the death of Christ, God has done for man what man could not do for himself. God has provided a way by which man, who is sinful and corrupt, can be forgiven, cleansed and brought into an intimate relationship with his creator. Now this relationship with God is not based upon something man must do but rather on the foundation of what God himself, in his son, has done.

The Significance of the Cross

At the time of Jesus' death, writers described it as the most painful form of death. The New Testament however, gives no actual detailed description of our Lord's physical death and suffering, but rather says reverently that he was crucified!

The New Testament's interest in the cross is neither sociological nor historical, but rather Christological. The writers are concerned with the eternal and cosmic significance of what happened once for all in the death of Jesus, the son of God, on the cross. On the hill outside Jerusalem, we begin to grasp that this was a point in time and space when God was reconciling the world to himself through the death of his son upon the cross. Theologically, the word "cross" was used as a description of the gospel of salvation. In short, this was a summary of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is that Jesus Christ died for our sins. So when we find people like the apostle Paul preaching the gospel and saying that the gospel is the word of the cross or the preaching of Christ crucified, we find that he is preaching the message of salvation.

The apostle, Paul, "glories in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" and speaks of suffering persecution for the cross of Christ. Clearly then the word "cross" here stands for the announcement of our redemption for the atoning death of Jesus Christ. In addition, in the New Testament the

cross is also a symbol of shame and humiliation, as well as God's wisdom and glory being revealed through it. Further still, the cross is a symbol of our union with Christ, not simply in virtue of our following his example, but by the fact of what he has done for us and in us. In substituting himself for us on the cross, we died in him and our "old self" was crucified with him so that, by the indwelling of his Spirit, we might walk in newness of life, thanks be to God.

The Pain of the Cross

2,000 years of Christian teaching has largely domesticated the cross, making it hard for us to realise how it was viewed at the time Jesus lived. The crucifixion was unspeakably painful and degrading. Whether the victim was tied or nailed to the cross he would have to endure endless agony as he pulled with his arms and pushed with his legs to keep his chest open for breathing. Then in exhaustion he would collapse until the demand for more air made the agony return as he sought to open his chest to breathe again. The whipping, the loss of blood, the shock and the pain all produced tremendous agony for the victim that could, in some circumstances, go on for days, ending at last in suffocation, loss of blood or heart failure. Where the authorities, for reason of haste, wanted early death, the execution squad would seek to break the victim's legs. The effect and shock of this action would probably bring death almost at once. Without the use of the legs the smaller arm muscles would tire quickly, speeding suffocation.

In Israel, beyond all these physical torments which the victim would go through, he would also have to face the shame of the cross. Among Jews, the cross was a figure of horror. In Deuteronomy 21:23 the writer tells us "anyone who is hanged on a tree is under God's curse". So in Israelite society, to be crucified was to be branded as cursed by God.

In the life of the early church, the curse which Jesus took upon himself is given a new perspective. Jesus at the cross is seen as fulfilling all the Old Testament sacrifices: it is a curse that removes the curse from believers. At the cross we see the fusion of the divine and of humanity, we glimpse both the king and the priest, and we see the suffering servant and the man with the broken heart. We also glimpse the beginning of a new humanity, we are given the supreme model for Christian ethics, the ratification of the new covenant; the power of God and finally and supremely we are given a picture of the heart of the gospel!

No gospel says much about the crucifixion itself because the details were known very well to all who were alive at this time; rather, the interest is in the theological aspect of what lay behind the crucifixion. The writers of the New Testament are concerned for us to see the attendant circumstances which relate to the cross and the significance of the cross to history and to the church.

Recommended Books

Set out below are two books which I hope you will find helpful in the preparation of bible studies on the theme of "The Cross". It is important that as we prepare to lead studies on this vital area of Christian doctrine, we keep in mind the different needs of the members of our group. I think it goes without saying that in each of the groups, there is a range of Christian experience and maturity. The aim of our studies and the books I will recommend are aimed at the group leaders as well as the members but of course, different books will suit different tastes.

As usual please use my notes only as a guideline, and wherever possible please supplement or alter my questions so as to make them more readily accessible to your particular group. To this end, the purchase of my main recommendation, "The Cross of Christ, with Study Guide", by John Stott will, I am sure, aid you with your own preparation and thinking as well as providing you with questions that you may wish your group to explore. I do however, believe it is vital that this is purchased by the group leaders - I feel the investment in it will be well rewarded by your own personal reading and study.

My Recommendations:

1. THE CROSS OF CHRIST – John Stott – published by IVP

This is the modern classic work on the theme of the cross. John Stott breaks the subject into three areas. Firstly, approaching the cross. Here he shows the importance of the centrality of the cross to Christian thinking and action. He goes on to develop the reasons why Christ died and goes to look below the surface of what it means. Part two takes us into the heart of the cross and here he looks at three particular areas – the problem of forgiveness, the satisfaction for sin and the self-substitution of God upon the cross. In the third part of the book he covers the achievement of the cross, looking at the salvation achieved for sinners, the revelation it gives us of God and of living under the cross, for the church, for ourselves and for those who oppose the gospel. This type of book is not one that you would necessarily sit down and read from cover to cover but rather a book that you would find useful to dip in and read several pages on a particular theme or area. During the studies themselves, I will try to make reference to "The Cross of Christ", and

highlight particular pages which would be useful to have or to read in terms of background reading. Normally I would try and highlight areas of weakness but in this particular case, I feel it is an outstanding book; well worth every penny spent on it!

2. THE CROSS: GOD'S WAY OF SALVATION

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones – published by Kingsway.

This excellent book is a collection of Sunday evening sermons by Dr Lloyd-Jones where he develops the theme of the cross and looks at the way in which God has brought salvation through the death of his son upon the cross. It will provide excellent background reading as well as giving many incisive thoughts, though you may not find it directly relevant to particular passages which we will study week by week. If the book has a particular strength, it is that it will show some of the breadth of the subject. The weakness of the book is that the particular addresses may not bear directly upon the themes and subjects on which your group wishes to dwell. However, it is well worth considering.

3. THE CROSS OF JESUS - Leon Morris.

Another excellent book on the theme of the cross.

Study 1: The Fact of the Cross

Matthew 27:27-54

The date is 15 nisan – AD 30 or 33 and the time, fairly early in the morning. Each gospel writer gives his own account and independent feel by what he includes or excludes. Matthew here tends to be somewhat more explicit than say, Mark. Here in Matthew's account we find a number of very telling references to Jesus and the Old Testament (verse 34 – Psalm 69:21; verse 35 – Psalm 22:18; verse 39 – Psalm 22:7; verse 43 – Psalm 22:8). As we will see below, the mockery which Jesus faces reveals more than the mockers think. For Jesus is indeed King of the Jews (verse 37), the new meeting place with God (verse 40), the Saviour of men (verse 42), the King of Israel (verse 42) and the Son of God (verse 43).

Our passage begins by revealing humanity at its worst. The Jews have mocked Jesus as Messiah, and now here the Roman soldiers ridicule him as king. The soldiers speak more truly than they know for Jesus is both king and suffering servant.

In verses 41-43 we hear of three further people mocking him. In verse 42 – “He saved others”, “He's the King of Israel” and “Let him come down from the cross and we will believe him”. Each of these attacks has several meanings at different levels.

Matthew then takes us to the theme of darkness. In verse 45, the darkness that is signified here was a sign of judgement or strategy. Again in verses 48-49, we find a reference back to the Psalms (Psalm 69:21). The reference here is not clear – what we are not sure is whether the offer of a drink is meant as a gesture of mercy or mockery!

In the final section (verse 51-56, the death of Jesus), what we have discovered is that Jesus' death has opened up a fresh access to God that made the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete. This is highlighted in verse 51 when we read of the curtain in the temple being torn in two from top to bottom. This long section is drawn to a close after the darkness, the earthquake, and the cry of dereliction on the cross convincing the soldiers who are watching that this is no ordinary execution. Some see this as the end but we should rather see this as the beginning!

Analysis

1. The Soldiers' treatment of Jesus (verses 27-31)
2. The crucifixion and mocking (verses 32-44)
3. The death of Jesus (verses 45-50)
4. The immediate impact of the death (verses 51-56)

Questions

1. Looking at the passage as a whole, notice the different people's reactions to Jesus. In particular, what do we notice about their cruelty and mocking of him as he is dying?
2. Looking at the passage as a whole, what indications were there, even before the resurrection, that God would have the last word? Why is this important?
3. Most people who witnessed Jesus' death did not understand the meaning of his death. What views about its significance do people tend to have today? How do they compare with what we have just been reading about on this subject? Some people have a weak interpretation of Jesus' death because their view of man's sinfulness is weaker than Jesus' view. How can we develop a more accurate understanding of human nature?
4. To understand the purposes of Jesus' death more deeply, look at the last words that he utters in verse 46. They are simple words with profound implications but need to be interpreted by 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13-14 and 1 Peter 2:24. What was Jesus actually going through for us at this time?
5. From this passage as well as from others that you might have studied, can you explain why Jesus died as he did? Why can't man pay the penalty for his sins by his good life or even by his own death?

Study 2: The Cross Foreshadowed Exodus 12:1-17, 29-30

In our last study, we looked at Matthew 27 and at the fact of the cross. We saw the brutality of Jesus' death; and we began to glimpse something of its significance for all mankind. We now travel back to the time of Moses where we come to an incident in the life of the people of God where they are seeking freedom from the Egyptians. This is a dramatic moment in the life of the people of God which was to be remembered until the present day. So, not unexpectedly, we find that this is given greater space in the word of God.

In the Old Testament we often find the idea of typology coming into play. Typology is a principle by which Old Testament persons, institutions or events such as the Passover are interpreted as "types" of the coming decisive work of God in Christ. *"The aim of typology is to show how Jesus fulfils not only the explicit predictions of the Old Testament but its whole fabric, to establish his coming as the final complete embodiment of the pattern of God's saving work through the ages"* (RT France). So in this tenth plague we find that typology comes into play in that Israel had to do something – namely to sacrifice a lamb! The fact that typology is present in this tenth plague is stated in 1 Corinthians 5:7. At heart, the tenth plague was the death of either the first-born or a lamb. It was the Lord who passed through the land, passing over the places where there was a sign of the blood, but slaying the first-born where it was absent.

The typological event centres on the threat of judgement and the alleviation of that judgement through the death of a lamb. It is for this reason that Paul speaks of Christ's death as the true fulfilment of the Passover lamb.

Each man who was the head of the household was to take a lamb, slay it, eat some of it roasted, burn the rest and put blood around the wooden supports of his door (verse 12). This was an act of faith (Hebrews 11:28). Again, we see the deepening typology. Notice that this was a day of judgement for all; it was the blood of the sacrifice that saved Israel! The people of Israel kept the Passover in faith. Externally the blood of the Passover was the difference the Lord made, internally it was faith. Again, if we consider Jesus and his death upon the cross, we see that this is a New Testament pattern. To turn again to the New Testament,

the cross was no invention of the disciples, nor of the early church, rather this was the rescue plan of God. The cross was God's provision, not man's manipulation. The frequent use of the word "hour" in the gospel of John shows us that Jesus looked to the appointed hour. Our Lord kept that appointment with the cross and it was a divine appointment, just as the lamb of the exodus was the divine prescription that dealt with sin and saved the people.

Analysis

1. Preparation for the Passover (verses 1-13)
2. Preparation for the unleavened bread (verses 14-17)
3. The departure at midnight (verses 29-30)

Questions

1. Why do you think Paul described Christ as the Passover Lamb? (See Exodus 12 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-8)
2. The lamb in Exodus 12 was to be without blemish. What characteristics of Jesus does this correspond to? Why is this important?
3. We can see by what the New Testament writers wrote about the death of Christ that it was seen as the fulfilment of the Passover. What does the Passover story tell us in Exodus 12 about God and the way he deals with human sin? (See page 139 and following in John Stott's book, "The Cross of Christ".)
4. In what way are the Passover and the Lord's Supper linked? And what do these links tell us about God and his need to have sin satisfied? (Concentrate especially on the idea of remembrance and the symbolism of the two events.)
5. The story of the Passover teaches us that God's judgement fell upon all who were in the land of Egypt (both Israelite and Egyptian). Today we know that the same judgement will be upon all. Therefore, what would you say to someone who said that they were doing their best to get to heaven and that they hoped that God would overlook their minor failings?

Study 3: Looking to the Cross

John 12:20-36

Chapter 12 of John is devoted to the crisis of Jesus' ministry that preceded its final conclusion. Jesus' popularity had declined because he had refused to become involved in a political coup (see John 6:15), and because some of his teaching had been hard to understand (John 6:52-66). However, Jesus still retained a loyal group of disciples and followers.

For Jesus himself, the period was critical because forces for and against him were crystallising and he had to make a decision which way he would go. He had lived by a programme established by his Father that had been progressively revealed by the scriptures. His overall aim was to do the Father's will.

John presents a series of events in this chapter each of which foreshadowed the coming end. The first of these was the feast at the house of Mary and Martha (verses 1-11). This is then followed by the entry into Jerusalem (verses 12-19). And then by the section which we are looking at today, of Jesus' response to the Greeks who come and want to see Jesus (verses 20-36). The Greeks' request contributed to the crisis. These Greeks were enquirers who had become interested in the Jewish faith but had not yet become full followers. It is interesting to note, that Jesus does not appear to respond to their request directly – rather Jesus felt it was necessary now to announce openly that the great hour of his life had arrived. No doubt Jesus felt the pressure of the Gentile world and realised that the time had come to open up the way to God for the Gentiles. For this to be achieved, he had to sacrifice himself (John 10:16). John, wanting to demonstrate this truth of sacrifice, gives us the beautiful picture of the wheat going into the ground and dying and rising and becoming fruitful in new life. Here we have a picture of sacrifice and blessing. In verse 25, "the man who attempts to preserve his life will lose it, while the man who readily sacrifices his life will keep it for eternity". Jesus was informing them that this was a model for them to follow. He had already implied this in his address on the Good Shepherd in John 10. So we see that "Jesus is going ahead of us" – he is an example for us to follow.

In verses 27-28 Jesus turned to reveal to his disciples how the crisis now affected him personally. This is followed in verses 28b-30 with the voice from heaven. This is the third instance of its kind recorded in the gospel narratives and the first that comes in John's gospel. This voice was a public acknowledgement of the sonship and authority of Jesus, in effect a public endorsement of the work that Jesus had been given by the Father. (The Father's audible support of Jesus occurs on three occasions in Jesus' ministry. Firstly, at his baptism, where Jesus' ministry begins. Secondly, at his transfiguration which marked the turning point in his ministry and finally, here, at the conclusion of his ministry.)

Jesus, in v31, declares that a decisive action must now follow. God's purpose was, and is, to glorify him. This whole section is mirrored by Paul's declaration in Acts 17:30-31, and we also here get the glimpse of Satan in this great decisive work at the cross. For Satan was motivated by self-will, where Jesus was motivated by the will of his Father. Satan's power brought destruction and death, which contrasted with Jesus who brought renewal and life. In verses 32-33 the phrase "all men" is picked up. It does not imply that all men will ultimately be saved, instead it means that Jesus draws all people to himself regardless of nationality, race or status. This section closes with both urgency and puzzlement. We find in verse 34 that the crowd was puzzled and in verses 35-36 we see that Jesus is speaking with urgency. We who have the benefit and the light of all the scriptures should not be puzzled, but like Jesus we should share his urgency for the need to face up to the meaning and reality of the cross.

Analysis

1. The request of the Greeks (verses 20-22)
2. Jesus' reply (verses 23-27)
3. The voice from heaven and the final confirmation (verses 27-36)

Questions

1. Looking at the evidence given here in John's gospel, what are we able to say was Jesus' perspective on his own death? What were Jesus' feelings as revealed about his imminent glorification?
2. In these verses we see that Jesus is facing the inner struggle as he faces both the reality and ultimate purpose of his death at the cross. What would that death mean for Jesus (verse 23)? What does the death mean for us who serve him (verse 24)?

3. Looking at verses 24-26, we see that Jesus loved the Father enough to glorify him even though it meant giving up his own life. What promises are ours if we follow in his steps?
4. Looking at verses 31-32, what is the attraction of Jesus? In particular, contrast the ruler of this world with Jesus? (The former is cast out and the latter exercises a magnetic drawing power.)
5. In verses 34-36 we are given the images of light and darkness. How do these help us to understand the significance of the work of the cross? Thinking in terms of what Jesus has to say, what are the advantages of walking in the light or the disadvantages of living in the darkness? How does this help us come to terms with the issue of unbelief?

Study 4: The Reconciliation of the Cross

Colossians 1:15-23

In Colossae, there was a dangerous heresy at work in the church. The heart of this heresy was to devalue the person of Jesus Christ. Those who followed this error believed that Christ was not the triumphant redeemer to whom all authority in heaven and on earth had been committed. He was seen, at best, as only one amongst many beings who had bridged the space between God and man. This type of heresy has repeatedly appeared in church history. However here in Colossians 1, we find the apostle Paul making one of the finest statements ever about the person and work of Christ.

This passage is part of Paul's answer to this heretical teaching; one of several great declarations about Christ in Paul's writings (see Colossians 2:9-15, Ephesians 1:20-23, Philippians 2:5-11).

In verses 15-18, three sweeping statements concerning Christ are made. Firstly, his relation to deity (verse 15a). Secondly, in relation to creation (verses 15b-17) and thirdly in relation to the church (verse 18). The essence of what Paul is trying to teach is to affirm that Christ has a cosmic significance. Here, we begin to glimpse how Paul is showing us that the gulf between an infinite and holy God and an flawed creation can only be spanned by his son, Jesus Christ. Paul is emphatic that Christ transcends all angelic beings (Hebrews 1:4-14) by his death and resurrection, therefore Jesus brought a once for all salvation.

In verse 19 we are told by Paul that God is with us in Christ. Verse 19 concerns the coming of God to dwell with men; this is foreshadowed from the earliest days of the exodus by the temptations in the wilderness (verse 25). Now it is in Christ that the fulness of God is pleased to dwell. In verses 20-23 Paul moves us on to the reconciling work of Christ. We are told that the Father was pleased to reconcile to himself all things through Christ. Notice here that the work of reconciliation is on the widest possible scale – “all things”. The paragraph as a whole may be divided up easily as follows: the “you” referring directly, obviously, to the Colossians, but also indirectly to all Christian people. The paragraph is broken down as follows: 1) What you once were (verse 21). 2) Where you now stand (verse 22). 3) How you must go on (verse 23).

Paul is leaving us in no doubt that Christ's work is utterly sufficient. Through Christ's death, God's people are already rescued, redeemed, forgiven (verses 13-14), at peace with God (verse 20), holy and guiltless (verse 22). It is true right now (verse 22)! What he has done for the individual he will bring about for the universe, when all things are reconciled in him (verse 20). No angel or other being could achieve all that Christ has done! For what Paul is teaching here is central to the work of the cross. At heart, we are seeing that the cross of Jesus is the deepest enigma of our faith, God dying for man.

Analysis

1. The scope of Christ's supremacy (verses 15-18)
2. The fullness of God in Christ (verse 19)
3. The reconciling work of Christ (verses 20-23)

Questions

1. In verses 15-23 we see Paul giving some wonderful teaching about Jesus. Why is Jesus given pre-eminence (verse 18)?
2. What difference does it make that nothing is outside Jesus' domain?
3. Looking in particular at verse 21, what does Paul teach us about Jesus when we think of his work of reconciling us to God? What were we like that we needed to be reconciled to God?
4. How did the death of Jesus make our peace with God (verses 20, 22)? Contrast this with 2 Corinthians 5:21.
5. What is God's ultimate purpose for us (verse 22)? Why are we without blemish and now free from accusation?
6. Our holiness is so important to God that he sent Jesus to die that we might be made holy. How important is it to us? How is the work of the cross to make us holy?

Study 5: The Cross and the defeat of Sin

Romans 6:1-14

Paul's letter to the Romans is a marvellous commentary upon the gospel of Christ and the work of the cross. These particular verses in Romans 6 are covered in some detail in "The Cross of Christ" by John Stott. If you look at page 276-278, you will find a wonderful coverage of this particular section there. My notes which follow will be a supplementary to what John Stott has covered.

Up to this point in Romans, Paul had answered such questions as these: Why does man need salvation? What has God done to effect it? How can we claim it?

The answers have come in terms of sin, condemnation, the gift of Christ, faith and justification. Is there anything more? Well, yes there is. For a Christian cannot safely be turned over to his own wisdom and his own devices, seeing that he has not yet reached the perfect state. He must still contend with sin and depend upon God and his resources. God's plan of salvation does not stop with justification but continues with the believer's sanctification. You see, God is concerned not only with the believer's status, but also with his state!

In verses 1-14 we see that Christ passed through certain experiences, namely death, burial and resurrection. Viewed from the point of his substitutionary sacrifice for sin, these events do not involve our participation, but our salvation depends upon them. You see, Christ was alone in enduring the cross, in being buried, and in being raised from the dead. But that work of redemption is not only substitutionary, it is also representative. "One died for all and therefore all died" (2 Corinthians 5:14). So here, Christians are being viewed as being identified with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

In verses 1-10 Paul gives us the statement of fact. It is notable that Paul begins his discussion by raising an objection and then answering it. The objection is this: "Are we not able, or even obliged by the logic of justification, to continue on in sin now that we are Christians, in order to give God's love as much opportunity as possible to display itself? The more we sin, the more God's love will be required to meet the situation, and this in turn will contribute the more to his glory". Paul's answer to this objection is crisp! —"We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?"

Notice, Paul does not say that sin is dead to the Christian (for further discussion on this theme, see Romans 7).

In verse 5 we encounter a problem concerning resurrection. (Is Paul here, referring to the future bodily resurrection of the Christian? I think not!) The resurrection in verse 5 has to do with the spiritual resurrection, the being raised with Christ - (see parallel passages in Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:12 and 3:1). In these opening ten verses of chapter 6, the problem of sin continues to dominate the thought of the section. Our spiritual history for Paul begins at the cross. We were there in the sense that in God's sight we were joined to him who actually suffered on the cross. So we need to ask, what was it that was crucified? "Our old self!" You see, the purpose behind the crucifixion of our old self is that sin should be rendered powerless so far as we are concerned. In verses 8-10 Paul takes us on to the theme of union with Christ. This union continues to be the theme but shifts our attention away from its effect on the problem of sin to a consideration of its bearing on the problem of death. Consequently, the resurrection now comes into focus.

In verses 11-14 Paul now goes on to make the appeal that is being based upon the facts as stated in the earlier verses. Here Paul employs a new key word "count" or "reckon". The charge to count oneself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, is in the present tense, indicating the need to keep up the process, if one is to avoid re-activating the body of sin. You see, paradoxically, the Christian is both dead and alive at the same time (see Galatians 2:20). Dead to sin, alive and responsive to God.

Paul concludes this section with encouragement and an incentive. He promises the Christian that if we will do as he has encouraged us, sin will not be our master!

Analysis

1. The statement of fact (verses 1-10)
2. The appeal based on the fact (verses 11-14)

Questions

1. Looking at the passage as a whole, what is your title for these verses? In verses 2, 7 & 11 Paul seems to be giving us teaching about sin. What is he saying? Does this tie up with the normal Christian experience? In particular, what practical difference would

it make to you and me if we followed verse 11?

2. In these verses Paul draws out the practical consequences of Jesus' death, being representative as well as substitutionary. What are they and how do they apply to us?
3. Pick out the different comparisons Paul makes with Jesus' resurrection (verses 4, 5, 8-10). What positive impetus could that give to a Christian or a church?
4. In verses 12-14 Paul now goes on to spell out what is involved in considering ourselves dead to sin. What picture do these verses convey to you? How would you expect someone to do it? (Notice the "therefore".)
5. Paul tells us that sin shall not continue to control the Christian. "It shall exercise no authority over you" – why? What has the cross achieved for the Christian in this area?

Study 6: The Message of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5

Again may I refer you to John Stott's book, page 224 and following. Here the writer gives us a great deal of detail and wisdom regarding the letter of 1 Corinthians, but in particular about the wisdom and the power of God in relation to this great theme of the cross. This page and the following section I think you will find is essential reading in preparation for this study. The notes that follow will be a supplement to the writing of "The Cross of Christ".

The life and growth of the church (both universally and locally) does not depend on great personalities and modern methods. A different kind of dynamic is at work: God's power in the gospel, "the message of Christ's death on the cross". Having begun the chapter by talking about the division and personality cults which had infected the Corinthian church, Paul then moves to come to his major theme and that is the message of the cross! You see, Paul does not want to concentrate upon the preacher but rather upon the message that the preacher brings, which is the basis of their faith. Paul's method was to preach "not with words of human wisdom", by which he means not with the cleverness of human argument, but rather he preached the heart of the message of the cross so that it should not be emptied of its essential meaning.

In verses 20-25 Paul emphasises that salvation is in Christ and not in the wisdom of men. Because Christ, the power and wisdom of God, is the source of men's salvation, men have no basis for boasting. The members of the Corinthian church all had their own ideas of what policy would work, or which personality should be followed. However, Paul has two things to say about this approach; first, it isn't clever talk or dramatic demonstrations that will rescue people from sin and bring them peace with God (verses 22 & 30). It is the seeming foolishness of the message about the death of Jesus on the cross (verse 23). Secondly, it is God's initiative in calling people to himself, which gives the message its power, and helps it make sense to the most surprising of people (verse 26). God's upside down, topsy-turvy way of working means that real freedom can be offered to all (verse 30)!

In verses 30-31 we need to see that instead of boasting, redeemed men and women must realise that salvation is all of God's grace; it is because

of God's effective plan that we are in Christ Jesus! Paul now adds other effects or results of our union with Christ; his righteousness, sanctification and redemption for us. So we see from beginning to end that it is not through human wisdom, strength or our position in life that we are saved, but only through God's wise plan and power accomplished through the cross.

In verses 1-5 of chapter 2 Paul now turns to the manner of his own preaching which he had begun in verse 17 of chapter 1. Here, he argues that salvation is attained not through human wisdom or might, but only through the cross. So, if we want to be "Holy Spirit Christians" as Paul is teaching here, the Holy Spirit will lead us to the cross and to glory in the work of Jesus. The primary work and power of the Holy Spirit is not to make exciting things happen but rather to bring men and women under the conviction of God's amazing love so that they will hate their sin and seek their God. Paul in essence is teaching us that the Corinthian Christians were immature, because they hadn't understood all that the cross had meant.

Questions

1. Looking at the passage as a whole, in what ways is the message of the cross "foolishness to those who are perishing"?
2. Verse 22 shows us what the Jews and Greeks expected of religion. Look at Galatians 3:13 to see what the Jews would have thought of the cross. For the Greeks, wisdom was insight into the nature of God and the world. How does the cross conflict with what they would have expected of religion (see verse 23)? Now, widening our field, what do our non-Christian friends think of the Christian gospel?
3. As Christians are we ever embarrassed by all this talk of blood and sacrifice when we link it to the message of the cross? Why do you think this is? Discuss possible solutions to this problem.
4. Thinking about our own church, what are the implications for the way in which Paul encourages the preaching of the gospel? How should the gospel be proclaimed?
5. How do we feel if anyone asks us about our faith? Do we feel anything like Paul at Corinth? Do our feelings put us off from saying anything? Does this passage help to correct how we should feel?
6. What have these studies on 'The Cross of Christ' taught us about Christ and the way of the Christian life? (Share anything you might have learnt or feel you have come to understand more clearly from these series of studies.)