



# THE CROSS

There is no more central symbol of Christianity than the cross. Paul declares the cross the very core of the Gospel. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend a third of their time on the passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. How we understand the Cross of Christ changes everything about how we understand God, the world—even life itself. When we consider all that Jesus did there, we stand amazed.

## THE CROSS • Hebrews 10:4–14 • Tim McConnell • March 17, 2019

What would you do to set someone free? My wife Abigail was in Nicaragua this week with the microloans ministry she serves, TOLI. Monday she visited a prison. The ministry there is a second-chance ministry giving released prisoners a new direction. In this prison was the single most difficult situation she has ever seen a person in. One of the men is paralyzed. His whole life is on the floor of a prison cell. What would you do to set someone free, if you could? If it was right? Our global missions had a team in Cuba two weeks ago where our partner church has growing freedom to worship and do ministry. What would you do to turn oppressive governments on their head if you could? What would you do to set someone free from addiction, and give them hope life could be different, the future could be free of the past? What would you do to create a fresh start? To prove your love? What would you give for the life of another, to save the life of someone you love? Jesus did it all, and more than we could ever understand. He did it at the cross.

Each week we are talking about the layers of victory Jesus won for you, and I hope you hang in with us and follow because I don't know which layer of Jesus' victory on the cross is going to mean the most to you, which part of what Jesus did is going to set you free. But today we start with the main thing. As we look at all these different sides, as we examine all these layers of the victory of Christ on the cross, we cannot forget, we must not set aside the main and primary point: Jesus died on the cross for us. Christ died on the cross as a *substitute*; it wasn't His death to die, it was someone else's death He took upon Himself. And His death on the cross was a sacrifice for *atonement*—it atoned, it made up for something. It atoned for sin. This wasn't some false martyr deal. This wasn't for attention. This was a needed sacrifice.

If I took you back to my office and we pulled every book off the shelf that has anything to do with what Jesus did on the cross for us, the books would be ten feet high. I've got eight pages here! It can't be done. In eight weeks it can't be done. We can only scratch the surface. But I so dearly want you to understand this today. I so want you to get what God has done through the atoning sacrifice of His Son Jesus on the Cross. This is the very core of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ as you follow Him as your Savior and Lord. Jesus died for you as a needed atoning sacrifice. "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). It is critical to understand why. If we don't understand that Jesus died for us, that Jesus made a complete sacrifice for us, in one way or another we will keep trying to make that sacrifice ourselves. If we don't get that Jesus died in our place and covered our failings and sins, we will never stop trying to make up for them

before God. Jesus paid it all. He has set you free. Christ died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Back in Exodus, God sent ten plagues to set His people free when they were slaves in Egypt. He sent flies and frogs and tainted water and illnesses; then finally God said if you don't let my people go, death is coming. The death you insisted on bringing to the Hebrew children, the death you persist in walking toward, that death is coming. God told His people to take blood from a lamb and put it on the doorframe. "The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt" (Exodus 12:13). "Come on, son, bring the bowl of blood. Get a brush and dip it in. The blood goes up like this. It goes across like this. It goes up. It goes across. Death will pass over. The curse will pass over. The wrath will pass over us." Why? In Jerusalem, the priests offered sacrifices. Blood. Lots of blood. I have led groups in the past through something called The Bible in Ninety Days, where you read the whole Bible...in ninety days. B90X. It takes about an hour a day. There's a week in there where every class has come in with one reaction, "Man, that's a lot of blood." It's not just two turtle doves, it's herds of bulls and oxen, goats and lambs; these sacrifices go on and on until you imagine the whole Temple Mount must be red with blood. Sorry to gross you out. But why? Why so much blood? Sacrifices of animals could not make up for sin, they could only cover it up. They could only promise a pass over, they could only cover over. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

"Why are we doing it then?" they must have thought. Why did God want it done? I mean, they ate all these animals. I can appreciate that. I like a barbecue as much as the next guy. But man, that's a lot of blood. Two things make blood sacrifice, and ultimately the cross, impossible to understand. One, if you have not yet come to grasp the gravity of your sin. Two, if you have not yet come to grasp the holiness of God. Sin separates us from God. God made you, loves you, never leaves you. God defines His relationship with you as one of total love and faithfulness. That never changes. That's how God, who is free to define the relationship however He wants, that's how God defines His relationship to you—Love. But your sins separate you from God. It isn't that He can't see you, it isn't that He can't hear you, it isn't that He can't reach out and grab you, but He is holy and you have sin, unholy, in you and holy and unholy can't mix. The blood, the life blood had to be shed. To be separated from the Author of Life is to be headed straight for death. But by the blood, God passed over, the blood covered over, the blood made it possible for the relationship to continue despite the cataclysmic breach...but it could never get

the job done. It was never complete until the final sacrifice came.

I thought about getting a car wash...once. Then I thought, why? Isn't it ridiculous getting a car wash in Colorado? What's the point? You pay nine bucks, because the six-dollar wash is nothing—that's like a prank. It just makes the dirt wet. So you pay nine bucks, and the next day it snows without any predictions for snow. A weather team in town tries to give the car wash prediction. Is it a good time to get your car washed? Let me give you the answer. No, it isn't. You live in Colorado. That's a little trite, but it's what Hebrews is saying in no uncertain terms about the sacrificial system of atonement through the blood of animals. "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11). It's human sin. Human crimes. Animal blood can't make up for human sin. But all that blood, all that sacrifice, it was all just to prepare us, and God told them to do it, all to prepare for the day John saw Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). He doesn't just cover over. He doesn't just wash with water. He takes away the sin. All the blood and sacrifice, imperfect, incomplete, was a foreshadowing of what would finally happen when Jesus went to the cross on Calvary, and the post went up, and it went across, up and across, and the wood became an altar, and the perfect sacrifice was made once and for all.

"It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me'" (Hebrews 10:4–5). Animal blood for human sin? No. So Jesus has a human body, flesh and blood. "With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God'" (Hebrews 10:6–7). Jesus never strayed from the will of God. As a man, in the flesh, as a human person, Jesus never sinned. He remained in God's perfect will at every moment. Never sinned. His human will was pleased to submit in perfect obedience to His divine will at every single step. He never sinned, though He was tempted and tested as you and I are, He was without sin. He owed no debt of sin at all but followed in God's perfect will, "And by that will," says Hebrews, "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). Jesus died on the cross as a perfect atoning sacrifice for sins. He died as a substitute, to pay in our place a debt we could not pay. We could not pay the debt sin owed. Why? Because we are all in sin. We are all in debt. You can't pay a debt if you are in debt. Only Jesus, only the sinless One, could possibly pay the debt we owed on our behalf. Only Jesus, who lived without sin, could take the debt of our sin upon

Himself and become a perfect sacrifice. It was a debt only a human being *should* pay, but it was a debt only God *could* pay, so God took on flesh Himself in His Son Jesus Christ and made, once and for all, the complete and perfect sacrifice for sin. Not to cover it over, to take it away. Not to pass over, but to atone, to pay its debt once and for all. What would you do to set someone free? Jesus paid it all.

"Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:11–14). Jesus secured a future for you that you are only now beginning to live into. Jesus is our High Priest. He made one offering, one time, one sacrifice for sins. Other priests stay standing—this isn't going to last long. I better be ready to go again. Not Jesus. "When this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." He sat down. It is done. It is finished. It is complete. Here me now, Jesus has already made a perfect and complete sacrifice for every sin, every error, every disobedience in your life past, present and future. It's over. It's paid. The only payment, the only sacrifice that could possibly be made, has been made. If you don't get this, you will keep trying over and over to make your own sacrifice to make up for your own sins. Stop it. Jesus has done it for you. It says a few verses down, "And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary" (Hebrews 10:18). Would you like to continue to beat yourself up for your sins? I say this in love, if you stay in your guilt, if you linger in your shame, if you don't accept the freedom and forgiveness Christ has bought for you, you are only insulting the One who died for you on the cross. He did it. Done.

You might object, it is gross for God to deal in blood. What a pristine and sanitized world we live in today. Look again at the blood stains in our world where terrorists have attacked malls, where Egyptian Christians have been bombed in their sanctuaries, where innocent infants are destroyed even after they are born; look at New Zealand. We are awash in blood. Our God doesn't shy away from flesh and blood. I'm grateful He knows about blood and brings life. You object that a loving Father would watch His Son die. Remember though, the Father and the Son are one. The Son's pain is the Father's pain. The Son's suffering is the Father's suffering. One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has made this needed sacrifice. You object that I say it is moral for an innocent man to die for a guilty one. This is a good objection. If we were in a courtroom and a gang member was about

to get sentenced for, say, gunning down two innocent high schoolers, and I stepped forward, took his punishment, and he walked out scot free, would you call that justice? No. How then is it justice, how is it moral that Jesus died for us, a sinless man on a cross of wood? You forget one step. Jesus took our sins upon Himself. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus, sinless, became sin. He died having become our sins. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). He died in sin—it just wasn't His sin. It was ours.

It was a sacrifice, that death on the cross. Jesus performed a sacrifice there. An atoning, substituting sacrifice. I can't go any further, but I think of what Alistair Begg often says to his congregation, "You're sensible people. Go home and read the scriptures for yourselves and see if it isn't true." Jesus knowingly, willingly allowed His body and blood to become a perfect sacrifice to atone for our sin. And it is complete. There is no sin unforgivable. There is no sin, no mark, that cannot be washed clean by His precious blood. There is no debt unpaid for you to be anxious about, wondering how you could ever come up with the necessary remainder to pay it off. Nothing. Nothing you have done or ever will do to shade your relationship with God or disobey, or run opposite, or mistakenly or gleefully break His law, nothing cannot be forgiven. Christ paid it all. He has paid it all.

Was it necessary? Not if we were to remain in our sins. Not if we were to remain separated from God and destined for eternal death. Not if we were to bear our own punishment for our disobedience. But God would not have that. God defined His relationship to you as one of eternal, abiding, unending love. So, was it a needed sacrifice? It was needed to get you home. God purposed to do whatever necessary, to take any sacrifice, to set you free. Even to send His own Son and take the pain into Himself. Oh beautiful exchange. Jesus took on all that was ours so we could have all that was His. Jesus took our place so we could have His. He substituted Himself for us to death and we are forgiven and free. But finally, remember, He didn't stay dead...

## STUDY GUIDE

### THE CROSS • "Needed Sacrifice"

#### Hebrews 10:4–14

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read Hebrews 10:4–14.

1. Israel had an annual ritual called the "Day of Atonement." (see Leviticus 16) The head priest slaughtered a bull and a goat and sprinkled their blood on the ark of the covenant. Then the priest would lay hands on a live goat and confess the sins of Israel on their behalf. Once this was done, someone would take the goat into the wilderness and release it. In this way, Israel's sins would be banished from them. They could once again consider themselves to be in "right-relationship" with the Lord. What do you think about this ceremony?
2. The "Day of Atonement" and other sacrifices weren't a permanent solution. What would it have been like to regularly be offering sacrifices back then? What would it be like if this was still a standard practice today?
3. On the cross, Christ offered a perfect and complete sacrifice. What do you think it would have been like for first-century Jewish Christians to go from regularly sacrificing animals to atone for sin to putting their faith in a sacrificed savior?
4. Verse 10 says we have been made "holy" by Christ's sacrifice. We are made new in Christ because of His perfect sacrifice. How has your life become "new" since coming to faith in Christ?
5. Do you ever find it challenging to accept God's forgiveness?

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

Pray for our church as we walk through this Lenten journey together. Pray that we would become more aware of the fullness of Christ's work on the cross.

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Last week you named a person you would invite to an Easter worship service. Pray that they would be open to your invitation.