



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 • 2 Corinthians 5:14–20 • Tim McConnell • April 7, 2019

At the foot of the cross, all things can be made new. There is a place in this world where the old dies and the new comes. There is a place where you can find new life, a fresh start—a place where your future is not just the natural continuation of your past but a new thing altogether, a new possibility, a new beginning, a new direction and new destination. There is a place where the past is forgiven and the future is freed, liberated from the burdens of past errors or failures. There is a passageway, a portico to a new world, a wormhole into a new dimension of life for you Sci-Fi fans. Your old life dies. Your new life begins. What was impossible becomes possible. Everything changes at the foot of the cross. The cross stands as a testimony that there is a place where all things can become new, where new life is possible. It also stands a witness to the cost. Jesus paid it all.

Christianity stands unique among religions in a number of ways. For one thing, it is the only religion that relies on the death and degradation of its own God. But, related to that, it's the only religion that offers rescue, not renovation. Religions apart from Christianity offer a way to go, a path to follow, a pattern to pursue: Follow the way the great leader went, and you might find peace, meaning, enlightenment ... maybe. Not all these religions are named religions, by the way. The same goes for the religion of consumerism, the religion of fame-seeking, the religion of self-satisfaction. You get the drift. Do it this way and you may find what you're looking for. Christianity alone proclaims that God came down to rescue and redeem, that God came down to experience death itself, in order to pull us home from where we had fallen. God didn't drop a ladder into the pit and say, "Good luck climbing out." God in Christ entered the pit with us to carry us home. Christianity doesn't expect you to save yourself, but to be saved by God in Christ.

My son Jack used to do a lot of Legos, and he made a Star Wars ship one time ... that I stepped on. That's my special talent—stepping on toys. It came apart, and I picked it up and quickly tried to push the pieces back together, which made another piece fall off, and another. The more I touched it, the worse it got. Finally, he just looked at me and opened his hands. Sorry kid. The same things happens when I pick up my son Peter's Rubik's Cube. I cannot solve those things. Every move I make only seems to get it more mixed up. My youngest son is into making slime. I can't mess that up ... much! Listen, when we are separated from the light of God, it seems like everything we touch just gets worse. Sin affects every part of us—mind, heart and will. We do what we

shouldn't do, but we also desire what we shouldn't desire, and we think what we shouldn't think. We are entirely mixed up, and the more you touch it the worse it gets. But here's the thing about what God did in his Son Jesus Christ on the cross: what God did there was not encourage you to try harder, or provide a model or pattern for you to follow; what God did there is insert Himself into the confusion and sickness and provide a cure. Jesus Christ has power to change a person. The old can be gone; the new can come at the foot of the cross.

This is what Paul was saying to the church in Corinth. The cross is a place where you go. You go and are transformed. But it begins with what Jesus did, dying for all. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14–15). Got that? Easy enough? OK, let me try to help here. What Jesus did changes everything and everyone. We were all subject to death, to separation from God, because of the condition of sin. In other places, Paul talks about us either being "in Adam," stuck in the line of Adam and Eve, stuck in the incipient disobedience of mankind, or being "in Christ." This is the line that is drawn. Are you in Adam and Eve, or are you in Christ? All died when Jesus died. What Paul is saying there is that the death we were all headed toward has been 'died'—it was 'died' by Jesus. Now there is a new possibility opened up for all of us. We might still stay in the line of Adam and Eve, but there's another possibility now. You could be in Christ. The cross demonstrates how total, how complete, how life-sized it is to move from "in Adam" to "in Christ." It means going to the cross. You. You going to the cross.

Let me just say as clearly as I can: You want to be in Christ. Remaining outside of Christ is not where you want to be. To be without Christ is the worst possible state. A preacher named C. H. Spurgeon said years ago, "It is a most unhappy condition to be without Christ. It is inconvenient to be without gold, it is miserable to be without health, it is deplorable to be without a friend, it is wretched to be without reputation, but to be without Christ is the worst lack in all the world." To be without Christ, to be apart from Christ ... first of all, we believe this means you are still subject to death after you die (in the afterlife). But if you're not a Christian you probably don't believe that, so let me say this to you. Dead and alive—these are metaphors. They refer to our eternal destination,

but right now, they are metaphors. I'm not physically dead if I don't know Jesus, but I am spiritually deadened, and I am psychologically trapped and enslaved. Look at verse 15 again: "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:15). Those who live no longer live for themselves. There is no more radical transformation than when you stop living for yourself and start living for Christ and those He has placed in your life. You may not be worried about the afterlife, how about tomorrow life? Today life? If you are the center of your universe, your universe is very small and getting smaller. If you are stuck in a solar system of self, the only gravity is what pulls things toward you or holds them in suspense around you, you are going nowhere. Listen, self-centered is self-enslaved. Jesus breaks you free from that. Jesus invades our self-centered solar system with an overwhelming new force of gravity. I'm not the center. He is the center. Now I'm not self-centered and self-enslaved; I'm propelled across space and time on a neverending adventure! We've been watching *Lost in Space*. I guess it's leaking into my sermons! Where are you headed? Augustine and then Martin Luther both described sin as being "curved in on yourself" (*incurvatus in se*). Our whole world tells us this is life. But we all come to find out this is death.

There is another way. Come to the foot of the cross, and on your knees look up humbly to the Lord who died for you. Put your life in his hands and find him as your center. Break the gravity and start knowing and living life eternal. Eternal life isn't just about living forever; it's about living right now. But it requires going to the cross. There is a place where life turns around and becomes new, where the center of gravity shifts, where the old dies and the new begins. It's at the foot of the cross. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is as radical and complete as new creation. It is as radical and complete as a man on a cross of wood giving His whole life away. Do you get that? That's why Jesus told His friends to take up their cross and follow Him. He meant, "I don't just come into your life as an add-on. I don't just come into your life as an accessory. If that's what you think, you will go nowhere. I don't enter your solar system as a ninth moon or something. My gravity takes over all. You give your life to Me. I make your life new." It is nothing less than a complete recreation of who you are. That's why Paul—think about this now, Paul, who was a violent anti-Christian terrorist—that's why Paul can say "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the

body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). And again, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (Romans 6:6-8).

Look, you don't come to Jesus by thinking about acting like Jesus. You don't move from "in Adam" to "in Christ" by living after the pattern of Christ. You go to the cross. Your former self—your enslaved and bound self, your curved-in self—gets put to the cross and dies. That's it. And when that happens, well, "new creation!" On the other side of the cross is the resurrection and Christ gives you new life, in Him, around Him, for Him, to Him—and that life is a joy; that life is eternal life. And, by the way, that former self was a false self anyway. It was a lie, a farce. In Christ you become your true self. I've seen it. I've seen it again and again and again, and it never fails to blow me away!

A few months ago I met an Iranian Christian man named Mehrdad Fatehi. "Iranian Christian?" I asked, "How'd that happen?" He said actually he became a Christian as a child when his dad converted to Christianity. His dad was a medical student in Iran, and the med school had a Bible study going on and his dad went, read some of the New Testament and heard about Jesus, but nothing happened. He went on to become a prominent doctor, but as his success grew, his misery grew just as strong. He was stuck in self-slavery. It was some twenty years later when he came to a place of deep despair. He hated his life. He said, "I was sick of my life. I hated being the man I was." Then a sentence dropped into his mind, he recalled what he had heard in that Bible study back in med school. The teacher had said, "Jesus has the power to change a man." Mehrdad's father decided to pray to Jesus. "Jesus, if it is true, if you have the power to change a man, change me." The next morning a delegate from the Bible Society came through the front door of his office asking if any would like to buy a Bible. It was the answer to his prayer. Mehrdad was ten when his dad came to know the Lord, and what Mehrdad remembers is a total transformation. A father who was distant, always out late, unfaithful, uninvolved, unloving was suddenly loving, faithful and caring toward his mother, aware of him and his sister. A home that was joyless and lifeless was suddenly full of love and laughter and kindness and peace. Total transformation. The old is gone the new has come. The entire family gave their lives to Jesus. That's what happened. Now Mehrdad is the director of

a Theological school in London training pastors for the underground church in Iran (which, by the way, is somewhere between one and three million strong).

One story. I could tell you so many! I could tell you mine. If you have never heard a story like that, ask the friend who brought you to church. We all have one. If you are no longer alone in a self-enslaved solar system, if you are no longer in Adam, but you have new life in Christ, everything changes. Christ can change a man. How is it possible? It is possible because what Jesus did on the cross had to do with all of us, it had to do with each one of us. He became our sin and bore its consequences. "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). What we were could not be in relationship with God, but Jesus became what we were so we could become what He is. Jesus died to remove the impossibility and reconcile us to God. How is it possible? Second, it is possible because God is the creator God. How can you say "new creation" for a new believer? You can say that because God is the one who created all things in the first place, and if He made it all to begin with, He can remake you. Creator God can recreate your life.

The cross stands as an opening to new life, but also as a testament to what it really takes. You surrender. You humbly surrender your life to Jesus your savior—as radical as nailing your old life to the cross. This isn't about incrementally bettering yourself. This isn't about adopting the ways of Jesus. That comes later. You love Him so much you just want to follow in his ways. But it begins at the foot of the cross. You lay down your life where he laid down his. Can you see your whole life nailed to the cross? Only then can you see your new life walk out of the tomb. The cross tells us today, this isn't about finding a religious project to do; it's about finding a rescuer. Everything I touch gets worse. I don't need encouragement to do better, I need real help, real restoration, real change. I saw a kid wearing a t-shirt in the crowd at one of the NCAA basketball games that said, "Be a good person." It's that easy! Maybe he's right. Maybe I'm too pessimistic. But I don't think it's that easy when every person in the world is the center of their own universe. I don't need a religion; I need a redeemer. I don't need a path; I need a pardon. I don't need a lecture on living; I need new life. I don't need a coach; I need a savior. Jesus didn't come to make good people better; He came to make dead people alive. Come meet Him at the foot of the cross.

STUDY GUIDE

THE CROSS • "At the Foot of the Cross"

2 Corinthians 5:14–20

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14–20.

- 1) This language is intended to evoke memory that "all have sinned" through Adam. Jesus is like a new Adam and His death and resurrection are a reversal of this. What do you think about the idea that one person could ruin something for everyone, and one person could fix it for everyone?
- 2) Paul writes that the life received *through* Jesus must be lived *for* Jesus. What comes to mind when you think about what it means to live for Jesus?
- 3) To be "in Christ" is to be united to Jesus like a branch to a tree, or a limb to a body. This personal relationship with Jesus is the mark of His followers. What are some of the markers or qualities of someone who is "in Christ?"
- 4) What sorts of things has Jesus "made new" in your life?
- 5) How do these verses inform our understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross?

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

If you have responded to the good news of the gospel, you are called today to join the disciples in serving as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. How can you take steps towards this in your life?

IN: Connect with Each Other

First Pres will launch Alpha right after Easter. Alpha is an eight-week course for non-believers which explores the Christian faith. We share a meal, hear a talk and then have a conversation that welcomes everyone's questions and thoughts. Consider who you might invite to participate in Alpha.

(Alpha will meet on Wednesday evenings from 6:30–8:30 in Café 225 from April 24–June 12. Contact kfowler@firstprescos.org for more information.)