



# 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 • 1 Peter 1:3-5 • John Goodale • April 28, 2019

A young pastor was just a few weeks into his first position when he received a sudden phone call from a funeral director asking if he could fill in for a last minute graveside service. Only the pastor and funeral director would be present at a new pauper's cemetery out in the country. The pastor nervously agreed, headed out the door—and promptly became lost!

After unsuccessfully driving country roads looking for the location, the young pastor was already 30 minutes late for the service when, to his relief, he saw a freshly dug grave. The funeral director was gone by that point and the grave already filled in, with two workers eating their lunch nearby. Feeling guilty for arriving so late, the pastor approached the grave and began pulling from Scripture every passage he could remember about the resurrection. Finally, 20 minutes later, he felt he'd done justice to the deceased, and nodded appreciatively to the workers. As he headed for his car, he heard one worker say to the other, "I've been putting in septic tanks for 20 years, and I've never seen anything like that!"

It seemed helpful to begin with humor, since talking about death is always a serious matter. On our Life After Death Sunday, I invite us to consider three facts. Fact No. 1: None of us will avoid death. That's not a pleasant thought, but it's a true one. It doesn't matter how young you are, how fit you are or how wealthy you are, death is coming at some point for every one of us. We may delay it a bit by caring for our bodies, but death is inevitable for each of us.

Fact No. 2: Most of us give little thought to Fact No. 1. It's not hard to understand why; life in this world is all we know, so we're inclined to ignore any thought of it ending. As someone once joked, "My goal is to live forever. So far, so good!" That approach works—until it doesn't.

In his study, "Western Attitudes Toward Death," Philippe Aries makes this observation: "Everything goes on as if neither I nor those who are dear to me are any longer mortal. Technically, we admit that we might die; we take out insurance. ... But really, at heart, we feel we are non-mortals." So we'd rather not think or talk about death. Some here today may be thinking right now, "Why did I come to worship

on this Sunday?!"

Friends, today's focus is important because of our final fact. Fact No. 3: All of us can experience life beyond death. We've affirmed this truth the Sunday after Easter for nearly 50 years, in the shadow of the cross and Christ's resurrection power. Perhaps it feels easier to avoid any focus on death—but then we'd miss a significant part of our story that's still ahead.

Do you remember the solar eclipse two years ago? Many people wanted to watch the eclipse, but obviously had to be careful to avoid eye damage. The solution was solar eclipse glasses, which allowed people to look directly at the sun. In the same way, we're able to look at death because of Christ's work on the cross and subsequent resurrection. As we do, we're reminded anew of the life that awaits us, even beyond death. Paul Johnson addresses the importance of this, writing, "Without God, death is horrific. With God, death is still fearsome, but it can be seen to have a meaning and purpose and a hope. The great strength of Christianity has always been that it brings men and women to terms with death in a way which offers them comfort and an explanation."

With all this in mind, let's look at today's passage in 1 Peter 1:3-5. Though it's only three verses, they're packed with reminders of the hope we have through the cross and Christ's resurrection. Peter begins our text by praising God: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" God is worthy of our praise simply for who He is, apart from anything He might do. That said, Peter goes on to describe much of what He's done for us. All the blessings that follow are grounded in Peter's next words: "In his great mercy ..." All that God does for us is prompted by His mercy; it has nothing to do with what we bring into the relationship. In His great mercy, Jesus entered our world, taking upon Himself the frailty of our form. In His great mercy, Christ submitted to the worst we could do to Him, willingly giving His life on the cross for ours. In His great mercy, God secured for us a future that death is powerless to end!

As a result of God's mercy, "he has given us new birth;" this brings to mind Jesus' words that we need to be born again to experience His life

change. Earlier in this series Tim reminded us that when we give Christ our lives, we become a new creation. When that happens, our days have greater meaning, our lives have deeper value and there is one who loves us for who we are, not for who we should be. We experience this newness right here, right now. That's good news—but there's more!

In God's great mercy, He has also given us "a living hope." Hope is incredibly important to us all; it's like a proverbial carrot out in front that keeps us moving forward. When we have little hope of what lies ahead, something can die within us. Peter makes an important distinction here, that we actually have a living hope. It's hope that remains alive regardless of what's swirling around us, even death. Peter is saying that it cannot be dampened or threatened by circumstances that change or crash in upon us. Nothing can diminish this hope, or cause the light it offers us to flicker.

Peter makes this even more clear in the next verse, but before getting there, he reminds us how and why we have this hope: it's "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." It was Jesus' submission to the cross's terrible work for our sins that positioned Him to triumph over death. Up until that moment in history, death had always won. When it took a person, their life was done. Jesus rising from the dead proclaimed to the world that He broke death's power to have that last word. Because of what He's done for us on the cross and from the grave, we have hope in what He will yet do for us.

All this is wonderful news, but Peter is still not done. He continues in verse 4 by telling us of our "inheritance." Perhaps you've received an inheritance provided by a family member who worked to leave something behind for you. That's exactly what Jesus has done for us. Through His work on the cross and resurrection power, He's given us an inheritance of life beyond death. Peter also assures us that this inheritance "can never perish, spoil or fade." Death cannot reduce it, evil cannot diminish it and time cannot dilute it. God has a wonderful life in store on the other side of death for all who have a personal relationship with Him. He'll hold it in place for us until the day this life ends, and we're ready for our inheritance.

Peter concludes this section with one more assur-

ance, in verses 4-5: "... you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time." There will be a decisive moment one day when God will save and restore His creation. We're given a glimpse of this near the end of the Bible when we read, "There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said 'I am making everything new'" (Rev. 21:4-5).

A little over 10 years ago, our family had a big vacation on the East Coast. One of our highlights in New York City was seeing the Broadway musical "The Lion King." I remember waiting for the curtain to finally part so we could experience what was on the other side—and how amazed I was to experience the beautiful colors and creativity. In fact, my jaw dropped for the first couple minutes!

Something like that will happen when we finally learn what God has for us on the other side of the curtain of death. Though we also must wait for that day, I believe there are some things we can look forward to.

First, it will be GOOD. I capitalized that word because with Jesus, we'll experience good on a whole new level. If we could somehow gather those moments in life that have given us the greatest joy and delight, I have to believe that they'll pale in comparison to the good we'll experience for all of eternity. For one thing, we'll finally get to experience all the best that God originally intended for His creation. John Ortberg wrote, "The promise of the Bible . . . is that resurrection will come and God's creation will be made glorious." We'll get to experience this—but that's not all. We'll also experience all the best that God originally intended for each of us when He gave us life.

One of our service branches has used the slogan: "Be all that you can be." Here in this world, we'll always be a bit less than we could be in our character, habits, reactions and abilities. That changes on the other side of death; we will finally be all that we've been created to be.

Second, we won't be bored. In his book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain has Huck say the following: [The Widow Douglas] told me all

about the bad place ... [and that] she was going to live so as to go to the good place . ... She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever . ... Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it."

Twain put words to the fear many have about life after death: that it will be a disappointing step down from this world. But here's the question: Why do we think we understand better than our Creator what would make for a meaningful existence?! Consider this: God created us for relationship with Him and with each other. This is a meaningful part of our years here on earth, yet our interactions are too often hindered by our inability to love as we desire and as others deserve. Then add to the mix insecurities, misunderstandings, competing agendas, hurt and conflict. Friends, there'll be none of this on the other side of death. We'll be in relationships in all the best ways.

Finally, God will reign. Why is this so important? Consider what the world we've been entrusted with looks like today. Our hearts ache at the violence, injustice, hatred, division, pain, poverty and indifference. Imagine how much better life beyond death will be with God in charge, rather than us; the love and peace that will undergird life and all that we experience under His reign.

One of my roles here at First Pres is to walk alongside those who are approaching death, as well as their loved ones. I can't imagine processing such a difficult experience without the comfort and hope that death does not have the last word. So I hope you'll indulge me as I close by asking: Have you experienced new birth in Christ? Do you have a living hope of the inheritance He has for you on the other side of death?

I hope you do, for it's this hope that provides comfort and meaning during the hard but inevitable moments when death occurs. Because of this hope, we can boldly affirm the declarations of both the Old and New Testaments: "Where is death's victory? Where is death's sting?" Yes, death does bring a sting. But because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, it won't be a permanent one.

## STUDY GUIDE THE CROSS • "Hope" 1 Peter 1:3-9

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

Read aloud 1 Peter 1:3-9. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- 1) Reread verse 3-4. What is the "living hope" that Peter describes?
- 2) Reread verse 6. Peter says that our lives now might involve grief, suffering and trials, but that we should rejoice. How can we rejoice in the midst of grief?
- 3) Reread verse 7. Peter seems to say that we experience grief, suffering and trials so that the genuineness of our faith may be proven or put on display. What do you think about this?
- 4) How does this passage deepen our understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross?
- 5) Identify one verse from today's Scripture that has new meaning for your life in light of today's group discussion.

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

How could you share the good news of the hope we have in Christ with your friend, neighbor, family member, etc., in the coming week

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

In the weeks since Easter Sunday, where have you noticed God working to bring new life in the lives of people around you? How can you participate in God's work?