

The Big Topics - Part Two: The Cross

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[0 : 0 0] Morning everyone. Good to see you today. And we are continuing the series that we started last week. If you were here or you've caught up online, you'll be aware that we are looking at some of the big topics of the Christian faith over this early part of January and February in our year. Areas such as sin and the cross. We're looking at hell and heaven and mission. They're the famous five that we're looking at. And so last week we looked at the whole area of sin and we tried or did our best to unpack both the way we missed the mark of the people God made us to be, but also the way in which our wayward choices are just part of a much bigger cosmic problem of evil. We also said though that the death and the resurrection of Jesus, events that we might summarize with one word, the cross okay, one phrase, the cross. That sums up the death and the resurrection of Jesus. So we saw how the cross, we said in some profound sort of eternal universal way, the cross broke the power of sin and death and evil once and for all. And so this week our task is to look at the cross in a bit more detail. We're going to try and work out how and why that's the case. Why is the death and resurrection of Jesus so significant and how does it work? Okay. Now that's a big ask. All right. So we'll give it a go.

But even the apostle Paul, one of the greatest theologians of all time, he talks about that the mystery of the gospel, the mystery of the good news of Jesus. You might say the mystery of the cross.

Indeed, there are aspects of Jesus, of God and how he relates to us that are just too much for our minds to comprehend. Certainly minds my size anyway. You know, like I don't know about you, I get stressed every couple of weeks when the recycling needs to go and you're sort of trying to cram everything in that blue bin. It's a bit like that with God trying to cram everything into our small minds or my small mind anyway. We'll never fully be able to get in and grasp everything about God. And as Paul says, there will be things that will remain a mystery. And yet this word mystery, I don't know about you, but I find it quite comforting really. It's quite a relief because it don't have to take the pressure off needing to have everything sorted in our minds. There's no exam to sit. There's no standard of knowledge to reach in order to relate to God. No, he loves us and he calls us to love him and to love each other. And love really is all we need to know. All right. It's all about love, which kind of means

I might need to sit down at this point because that's all we need to say this morning, but I'll save that for a bit. Because Paul says this, he says, in terms of the mysteries and the knowledge, he says, if I can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing. I am nothing. I can fathom all the mysteries and all the knowledge, but if I have not love, I am nothing. I almost want to get a Manuel from Forty Towers voice in there. I know nothing. I know nothing. It's true. Love is far more important than knowledge. Now I said I could sit down at this point, but we're going to look this morning at the death and resurrection of Jesus because it's that, I think, in which enables us to catch sight, perhaps, of what love, and in particular, what God's love looks like in action.

So it's going to be a bit of a meaty one this morning. Apologies to the vegetarians and vegans among us. There's some meat to get through today. So if you're up for this, eyes down for a full house, and we'll have a crack at trying to unpack what the cross is all about and why Jesus died and rose again. Now it's worth saying, though, at the top, that the cross is such a deep and, as we say, mysterious event that the writers of the Bible use a variety of different images and metaphors to try and make sense of it. And there's loads when you look through the New Testament. Now we haven't got time to go through them all individually today, but it'd be good to maybe look at the top three ideas, I think, and see how they might help our understanding of the cross. So firstly, in no particular order, though, we'll go with this one. A main way of understanding the cross is that it was first and foremost about victory. So yes, in being crucified, it would seem that Jesus had lost, he'd

been defeated, but by coming back to life, Jesus has actually won. Despite the horrors of his crucifixion, Jesus' resurrection meant that the power of death, of violence, of shame, of the evil system which sought to get rid of him, all that has been overturned once and for all.

[5 : 16] Jesus has won the victory that we ourselves are unable to win, meaning we can experience freedom and release from captivity, because now, as it says in Romans, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Love which has been demonstrated and worked out through the cross. And there are various Bible passages, when you flick through, which reflect this victory idea. So for example, in 1 Corinthians, it says this, the sting of death is sin, but thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's a powerful picture of a huge sort of spiritual battle. We might call it a rumble in the cosmic jungle, you know. Indeed, if there was a soundtrack to this kind of idea of victory, it'd be the theme tune to Rocky, I'm sure, you know, that kind of thing. You know, it's an uplifting battle song of victory, where despite apparent defeat, life overcomes death, light conquers darkness, good wins against evil, and ultimately, Jesus reigns over all.

Now, one of the best things about this victory model is the way in which it underlines how Jesus' resurrection and coming back to life is key to understanding his death. Two sides of the same coin that can't be separated. And it reminds us, I think, of how throughout Jesus' life, we see him constantly performing, you know, many acts of resurrection, which anticipated this ultimate victory on the cross. Many acts like healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, lifting up the excluded, the poor, and so on. It's the good stuff. And yet, as with any metaphor, you know, it's a picture which doesn't work entirely on every level. For example, as good as this victory idea is, it could be said that it doesn't really focus enough on our sins, as we were looking at last week, and the ways in which we as humans can inflict real damage on each other. Yes, Jesus defeats the power of sin and death by dying and rising again. But this victory way of understanding it, actually, there's very little consideration given to our need to repent and to turn away from all that is wrong. Having said that, though, some of the pros and the cons. What's interesting, I think, is that this victory idea was the main way in which Christians understood Jesus' death and resurrection for about the first 1,200 years after he ascended to heaven. So for 1,200 years, victory was the main thing that the church spoke about to understand Jesus' death and resurrection.

So what do you reckon? How does that sound to you? Do you like the sound of victory being a main way to understand the cross? Does it sit well with you? Is it a helpful kind of picture? Do you like the idea of Jesus as rocky, perhaps? Or maybe, actually, you think, yeah, it's part of it, but it's lacking something, perhaps, as well. Hold on to that thought. Keep that one up there. Because whilst victory as a model is one way of looking at things, and it has got a lot going for it, it's far from the only way to explain what Jesus' death and resurrection is all about. For example, another way to look at it is what, through we might call the ransom model. Okay, the ransom model. And it's an idea which is drawn from Jesus himself. He mentions ransom at one stage in Mark's gospel when he says this, for even the son of man, a nickname Jesus gave to himself, even the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Now, the ransom view focuses on how the cross delivers us from captivity. You know, not in a sense that we've been kidnapped, if you like, as we might think about ransoms today. No, more specifically at the time of the Bible. Ransom was all about being delivered from slavery. So in Jesus' time, a ransom was a well-known term for the amount paid to buy a slave's freedom from their master. And so in dying on the cross, we get a picture of Jesus paying our ransom with his life in order to free us from being slaves to sin. If you want to think about him that talks about this, and can it be, is it? No, my chains fell off, my heart was free. It's a picture of being released from slavery, being chained up.

But then Jesus doesn't simply remain as a ransom, but he rose again to new life. And that means we also have in Jesus someone who shows us how to then live as free people and make the most of the freedom his ransom has given us. Again, the hymn goes on, the next line, I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

[10 : 23] There's a chains fell off, yeah, but then it's get going on the resurrected life. Now, interestingly, as we talk about ransom, you may recall that it's the image which C.S. Lewis famously uses in his book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. If you've seen the film or read the book, you might recall.

Aslan, the lion, who represents Jesus in the story, he gives his life over to the wicked white witch as a ransom. You know, remember, exchanging his life for Edmund, this young boy that the white witch has enslaved. Edmund goes free, Turkish delight and all, and the witch, unfortunately, kills Aslan.

But then Aslan comes back to life and breaks the power of winter and darkness and evil once and for all. And if you've read the book or seen the film or both, maybe it highlights, I think, how powerful an image this idea of ransom is. I remember as a kid watching, there's a cartoon version of Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. It's on most Easter's, I remember, growing up. Before the days of video and all that, I am that old. When it was on telly, we'd make a point of watching it.

And I remember as a six or seven-year-old watching it and for the first time, really, grasping something of what Jesus had done for me by this story of Aslan. I remember getting quite emotional about it, just realising what it took for Jesus to be a ransom for me. And there's a lot of truth in the idea, perhaps best brought out in the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. And yet, I think this ransom idea also leaves us with some difficult questions. It doesn't tickle the boxes, I'm not sure, because one of the questions it leaves us with is, who is the ransom being paid to? Because if God is all-powerful, why does he need to pay off someone to get his way? Why does he need to bargain, presumably with evil, in order to win? That's one issue, I think, with it. Also, though, I think it turns Jesus into a bit of a trickster, a bit of a con man, perhaps, you know, handing himself over to the forces of darkness to trick them into thinking that they've won when they kill him, only to come back a couple of days later, back to life, like a big reveal, you know, ta-da, fooled you, got you after all, you know. I'm not sure that quite sits, really, with the image that we've got of Jesus. As I say, though, there are pros and cons to this ransom idea. So again, how's it sitting when describing it? How does it sit in your mind, your perception of who God is?

How helpful a picture do you find it? Or does it not quite tick enough boxes that it's not the one you want to base everything on? We've done victory, that's ransom. But a third theory of the cross is one which we might call substitution. And it's a theory which tends to go something like this.

[13:27] So the theory goes. We as humans are sinners, and our sin gets in the way of our ability to relate to God. Problem is, though, because God is holy, he can't just ignore our sin. And because God is just, he knows our wrongdoing deserves punishment. We deserve his wrath. But rather than punish us, God sends his son, Jesus, to take the punishment we deserve by dying on the cross. And so by substituting Jesus for us, God's holiness and his sense of justice is satisfied, and we are able to be forgiven and free to take our place with him in heaven. Now, if you want a posh term for that kind of theory, this is what it's called. Penal substitutionary atonement. Penal, I have to say that word carefully, penal because there's a penalty to be paid. Substitutionary, because Jesus takes our place with that penalty. And atonement, because Jesus makes amends for our sins by living a perfect life, and thus making him an acceptable sacrifice to God. Might be a familiar one that you may be grown up having heard, perhaps. And in many ways, it is a helpful picture, because it underlines something that the victory one perhaps doesn't do. It underlines the seriousness of sin, and holiness, and the justice of God. And also the way in which Jesus' act of dying was one of huge sacrificial love for us. And again, it's a model that we can find various bits in the Bible to back up this kind of understanding. For example, 1 Peter says this, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous,

Jesus, for the unrighteous, us, that he, Jesus, might bring us to God. That he might bring us to God. And again, we mentioned an old hymn earlier. There are popular worship songs which reflect this kind of way of understanding the cross. In Christ alone, for example, one is sung nationwide. One of the lines is till on that cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied.

That's also a model which, and you may have seen this, it's represented by that kind of picture sometimes. So the idea is that God is on one side of this chasm, we're on the other, and we're separated by sin. That separates us from God. But Jesus comes, and by his perfect life and atoning death, by the cross, Jesus becomes the bridge between us and God. And maybe, maybe that picture is how it works.

Maybe. And yet, I think many would argue that there are some significant problems with this way of understanding the cross. I think for a start, there's a real danger that we see Jesus as in some way being less than fully God. Now, how can Jesus be the bridge between us and a holy God when Jesus is God himself? You know, the one who came to be God with us, literally, in the flesh?

Now, this picture risks splitting God between himself with Jesus being seen as less than fully God in that he, in some way, seems to compromise his holiness in order to get stuck in with us.

[17 : 20] Another potential problem, though, with this substitution model, I think, is that it primarily portrays God as an angry God who needs placating rather than a God of love who gives that love freely.

I mean, John 3.16 famously says, God so loved the world that he gave his only son. But with the substitution model, and Tom Wright said this, I was reading this week, he says, the impression sometimes given, instead of that, with this model, is that God so hated the world that he killed his only son.

Indeed, with this model, it could be said that it's God, not sin. That's the main problem which needs solving. To quote George MacDonald, a 19th century Scottish writer, he said this, Jesus came to save us from sin, not punishment.

Now, connected to this, there's another difficulty that some have, particularly in a way in which forgiveness is understood with this theory. So the theory says that because God is just, he cannot forgive sin without a penalty being paid.

God cannot forgive sin without a penalty being paid. But is that true? Is that true? Can God really not forgive without punishing someone?

[18 : 58] Because doesn't Jesus tell us to do exactly that? I think a difficulty, perhaps, with saying that God cannot forgive without inflicting punishment on someone, is that the word we translate in our Bibles as forgive is a Greek word.

A fear me. A fear me. That's the Greek word. There you go. A fear me. Which literally means to let go. To let go. Forgiveness means that we let go of the wrong which has been done to us.

And we choose not to take revenge or inflict punishment in payback for it. Forgiveness is therefore a gift which breaks the cycle of sort of tit for tat, an eye for an eye, revenge.

And in fact, in Jesus, we see someone who forgave people their sins all the time without asking for anything in return. Telling them that they were free to go.

And crucially, Jesus does this before he even dies. Or think about parables like the prodigal son or the lost son, as it's called. The whole point, it seems, of that story is that the father doesn't demand payback or retribution from his lost son.

[20 : 19] But when he returns, he welcomes him back with open arms, freely forgiving him. And yet the substitution model seems to prioritise the need for justice above that of love.

It depends on revenge. It depends on punishment for wrongdoing being inflicted. And yet it seems to me that true justice is actually about reconciliation and restoration, not retribution and revenge.

However, I think probably the biggest problem with the substitution model as an explanation for the cross is that there's no need whatsoever in this theory for Jesus to rise again.

It's all about his death and the way in which the punishment that he takes pays the penalty for our sins. Indeed, not only does the resurrection seem pretty irrelevant, it doesn't seem to matter if Jesus comes back to life or not.

Actually, the rest of Jesus' life doesn't really seem to have an impact on things either. Because all that matters in this theory is that through his death, we are made right with God for eternity.

[21 : 34] And this life, indeed Jesus' life, seems to take a back seat. Seems neither here nor there. I think we could say that any theory of the cross which doesn't acknowledge how important the resurrection is, how essential it is that Jesus came back to life, that theory's got to be incomplete at best.

And yet, as I said at the top, there are some good things with this model. Not least, the seriousness of sin. And it talks about the holiness of God. And again, I appreciate this as a picture, probably we've been taught or we maybe have grown up with over the years.

And maybe become quite attached to in our understanding of who God is and how he works. So again, the substitute model. How is it sitting with you as we go through it?

Something that you think, yeah, that is how it is. That's how it is. Or do you feel slightly hesitant about it? Slightly uncomfortable, perhaps, with the character of God that it seems to be portraying?

All of which, with this victory, ransom, substitution, top three models, I would say, of what the cross is all about. It proves how tricky it is to come up with an all-encompassing theory about what the cross is about and what Jesus achieved on it.

[22 : 53] And yet, whilst none of these metaphors, victory, ransom, substitution, none of them are perfect, I think perhaps the one thread which unites them all, it could be summed up, I think, by this word.

Liberation. Liberation. And this is a word which, for me, is key to what Jesus' death and resurrection is all about.

Let's unpack that a little bit. So perhaps think about it like this. At the Last Supper, we're told that Jesus describes his own death as being for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, when he does that, it seems to me it's not actually about an attitude of forgiveness within God. You know, Jesus' death doesn't enable or twist God's arm to forgive us.

No, God has always had an attitude of forgiveness. For example, in Psalm 130, in hundreds of years before Jesus died on the cross, the writer says this, If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

[24 : 06] But with you, there is forgiveness so that we can, with reverence, serve you. See, instead, when the Bible talks about the forgiveness of sins in the context of the cross, I think it's about the forgiveness of sins in the cross, the forgiveness of sins in the cross, needing blood to be shed in order for that to somehow placate an angry God.

Rather, the blood Jesus shed on the cross is so that we can be forgiven in the truest sense. This a fear me word. Released, set free, delivered, liberated from the hold that our sins have over us. And the damage and the decay and ultimately the death that without Jesus, our sin would inevitably lead to. God doesn't need, I don't think, to punish us for our sins.

Far less his son. Doesn't need to punish Jesus for our sins. Because living with the consequences and guilt of our bad choices, I think is punishment enough.

Both in our lives, but also more profoundly in the kind of world it creates. We'll talk about this more next week when we look at the whole topic of hell. But in many ways, hell is something I think we do to ourselves when we refuse to repent or trust in God and his ways.

[26 : 03] God is not angry with us. God is not angry with you. He loves us. First and foremost, he loves us. Despite, or perhaps even because of the mess we make of life.

If God's angry at anything, I'd say he's angry for us. And the way in which our enslavement to sin, our weakness, our inability to resist it.

He's angry about the way that damages us as the beautiful people. He's made us to be. In response to that righteous anger, we might say.

Jesus' blood is indeed poured out. But it's poured out, as Jesus says, for us. As a gift. Not for God. As a payment. And that is the good news, I would say. That by dying, Jesus in some magnificent, mysterious way, took with him to the grave all of the pain and the hurt and the consequences of our sins.

[27 : 12] Liberating us from their hold, their power. Freeing us, if you like, from our captivity, our slavery to sin. But even better than that.

Even better than being liberated from sin and death by Jesus' crucifixion. We're liberated for love and for life.

Liberated to do something. Liberated to be a resurrected people. The God through his spirit, I would say, continues to work out that resurrection. Continues to work out that healing, that redemption, that reconciliation.

That restoration in our lives. And he invites us to share that same spirit with all those we live alongside. So for me, this is my opinion.

You don't have to agree with me. This is my view. The cross is all about liberation. Liberation for us as sinners from sin and guilt and from shame and harm.

[28 : 12] But also liberation for us as people hurt by the sin of others. As God offers us his resurrection power to repair and redeem and restore that which has been damaged individually, communally, cosmically, I would say.

A lot of words, I know. So, just like last week, we're going to press pause there. All right. Which may be a relief to some of you, I know. And we'll pick up the thread of this and implications for what I've been saying with the topic of hell next week.

And I appreciate for some the topic of hell may not be one that you're falling over yourself to come and hear about. But I'd encourage you to come next week or at least catch up online if you can.

Because my hope is that what we'll discover about hell is actually part of that liberation as well.

But for now, just one final thought to all this. Now, if the cross, if Jesus' death and resurrection is at his heart all about liberation, then how does that apply to our lives today?

What would you say you need to be liberated from this morning? What expectations?

[29 : 36] What disappointments? What fears? What memories? What sins do we need to be liberated, released from?

What do we need to be able to let go of today? Again, just quietly have a think. Allow God to shape your response to that.

What are you carrying that you need to leave at the foot of the cross? Knowing that it's a place of liberation and release of freedom and forgiveness. And if you're thinking, you think, well, that's been there for years.

That's massive. Or it's ingrained in you. To the extent that you're not sure you can be free from it because it's part of who you are almost. Then I'd say, take heart this morning.

Take heart. Because our God is a God of miracles and mystery. And his resurrection power breaks even the fiercest of strongholds.

[30 : 44] My chains fell off. My heart was free because of the victory of Jesus. Because of his liberating power.

Let's just pray and continue in that attitude. So, dear Lord, thank you for your cross.

Thank you for the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And for all that you have done and won through it for us. Through Jesus. And Lord, as we said at the top, it's a big topic.

Perhaps the biggest of topics there is. So, if we're struggling to get our heads around why and how it works, it's no wonder. But would you help us, please, to grasp something afresh of the good news this morning.

To appreciate something of the liberation that your cross brings to our lives, our community, our world. And we've been thinking about this, Lord.

[31 : 56] But we ask that this morning, would you please liberate us in those areas of our lives which hold us back. Which may cripple us.

Those memories, those hurts. Those disappointments. Will you free us from carrying that weight. Restore us to fullness in you.

Lord, we also want to ask you to liberate us in those areas of our lives which enslave us. Which tempt us. Which lead us away from you, Lord. Our sins. Liberate us from the ways in which we succumb to temptation and disfigure.

Mar your image in us. Missing the mark of who we're meant to be in you. So, Lord, would you forgive us in the truest sense.

Would you liberate us from our sins. That we and those we've hurt along the way might know your peace. Your restoration.

[33 : 08] And your hope. Thank you for the cross, Lord. Thank you that you died and rose again for us. And for our world. May we live as people liberated by that truth and that love, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.