

The Power Of The Cross

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[0 : 00] And as you take your seats, if you would turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter 3, verse 18. Our passage this evening is just one verse, really it's just one half, first half of this verse.

1 Peter 3, verse 18. I'll let you stay seated. You've been up enough this evening. 1 Peter 3, verse 18. Please follow along with me as I read.

He says, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God. Would you pray with me?

Father, we ask on this night as we remember the cross of Christ, God, we ask that what He did would become so clear to us.

And why He did what He did, why He died the way He died, why He suffered the way He suffered. We pray, God, that He would make this clear to each and every one of us.

[1 : 03] And would we rejoice this evening that the blood of Christ has been shed for sinners like us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Just about everyone recognizes the cross.

The cross of Christ is a well-known symbol. It's become the symbol of Christianity. Most Christian churches have a cross somewhere about the building, either inside or maybe on a logo.

It's even become popular to decorate homes with images of the cross. People decorate their bodies with images of the cross. The cross has become a popular tattoo.

Women decorate their ears and their necks. Jewelry is often portraying this image of the cross. I was told when I planned to move here to the Charleston area that, I don't know if this is true or not, but an unofficial building rule in Charleston is that no building can be built higher than the tallest steeple so that as you enter into the city of Charleston, literally what you see in the skyline is the image of the cross as you enter into the so-called holy city.

Many, especially where we live, are familiar with the image of the cross, but I would argue that not so many truly understand the impact of the cross.

[2 : 28] They see it as a symbol, but they don't really understand the significance. But of course, that's the most important part. We need to understand the power of the cross.

What is the significance behind those two beams of wood, one vertical, one horizontal, one up, one across? Why do we make such a big deal about it?

Not just on Good Friday, but each and every week as we gather together for worship. Why are Christians so obsessed with the cross? I'm convinced that one of the greatest dangers that faces our Western, American, Southern culture is that many of us can point out the cross, but not as many of us really get the point of the cross.

And so this evening, what I want to do is spend the next several minutes together asking some questions about this cross. And I have three questions for us this evening.

And the verse that we've just read hopefully will answer them for us. And my questions are, what did Christ do? Who did he do it for?

[3 : 39] And why did he do it? First question, first, what did Christ do on the cross? Well, the Puritans, they had this way of studying the scriptures and expounding the scriptures where they would take one verse, maybe even just one phrase even, and they would just very slowly, very deliberately turn it all around.

It's kind of like looking at a diamond. They would see the light reflecting off of each and every angle, each and every side. They would inspect it slowly. And so I just want to do that for a minute here as we ask, what did Christ do?

Let's just take this phrase by phrase very slowly. Let the verse tell us. The first phrase here, Peter says, Jesus Christ suffered. I mean, really, the cross is not a beautiful thing.

You realize that, I hope. And not in and of itself anyways. The cross would never have decorated any home in the ancient world. No one would have ever thought to wear the cross as jewelry. Why? Because the cross is an instrument of torture. The cross is a gruesome thing. It's a symbol of suffering.

[4 : 54] The Romans would execute their criminals in the most horrific ways, nailing them to a beam of wood by their wrists and at their ankles. They would be beaten to the point where they're barely recognizable, and then hung there on the top of the hill as a matter of public shaming.

See, they were not only trying to kill their criminals. They wanted to make an example of them and humiliate them as a public example so that everyone would see it.

The criminal would be left there on the cross struggling in vain to push themselves up with their feet so they could catch their breath as they hung.

It was almost like drowning as their lungs were pushed to their maximum capacity. Actually, if you read up, it says asphyxiation was the leading cause of death in a Roman execution.

Why? Because you could breathe in easily enough, but your lungs, the way you hung there on the cross, you simply could not exhale. And then, if they survived all of this, when they were done with you, the Romans would come through.

[6 : 03] They would break the criminals' legs so that they could no longer push themselves up, and eventually their bodies would give way and they would die. Why are Christians so obsessed with this cross?

And the cross is a picture of gruesome suffering. It makes you wonder, why in the world would anybody wear this as jewelry around their neck or decorate their homes with this?

Nobody wears necklaces of the electric chair. Why do people celebrate the cross? One clue is found in this little word, also.

Christ also suffered. The apostle Peter, he writes this letter to suffering Christians.

Those who would receive this letter were Christians who were being persecuted for their faith.

These were Christians who have had the doors of society and the doors of commerce shut in their face.

[7 : 05] Christians who are realizing all of a sudden, in very real ways, that following Christ in a sinful world comes with consequences. It is difficult to stay faithful to Christ in a world that hates Christ.

What comfort can the apostle Peter give to suffering Christians? He says, Christian, look to the cross and remember Christ also suffered.

And what a comfort that is for us, Christian. When we suffer. And when we wrestle with the hardships of life in a fallen and sinful world.

When it feels like no one understands what we're going through. Or maybe no one cares. In fact, that's the one thing we can't say. Because we look to the cross and we see Christ also suffered.

The author of Hebrews tells us that he himself suffered while being tempted. It tells us that we have a great high priest. One who's able to sympathize with us in our weakness.

[8 : 13] He was made like us. If you feel pain, you can look to the cross and see Christ also suffered. If you have been rejected, you can look at the cross and see Christ also suffered.

If you have been hated, we can look to the cross and remember the Son of God understands. He can commiserate with us in our weakness, in our suffering. He can truly say, yes, I know how that feels and I care.

Jesus is a friend of sinners. But it's also much more than that, isn't it? And we get another clue why Christians celebrate this ugly cross.

In the second part of that first phrase here, he says, Christ also suffered once for sins. And the Bible tells us that all suffering can be traced back to the existence of sin.

We suffer because there's sin in the world that leads to suffering. There's sin in our families that leads to suffering. There's sin in our own hearts that leads to suffering. Sin always ends in suffering.

[9 : 23] And ultimately, if we die in our sin, we will endure eternal suffering. The wrath of our holy and just God will be poured out on all who remain in their sin.

This is far greater than even the worst imaginable physical suffering that you can endure in this life. But here we see good news. Christ also suffered once for sins.

We look to the cross and see Christ's suffering and his death. It was not just the product of sin. It's also and especially the payment for sins.

Christ suffered and died not just so he can sympathize with us in our weakness, but so that he can save us. Church, we celebrate the cross because here we see Jesus Christ suffered once as a one-time, all-sufficient, paid-in-full payment for sins.

In other words, his suffering and his death is not just to identify with sinners, although he does, but to rescue us from our sins and to save us from the wrath of God, to redeem us from the curse of sin and death.

[10:48] This is what Jesus has done on the cross. He's died as a substitute for sinners in our place, which leads us to our second question. Second phrase here.

Our second question is, well, who did he do this for? Who is this sacrifice for? Whose debt did he pay? And surely in our way of thinking, we would say, Christ came to save the best among us.

Christ came to save those who have tried the hardest. And Christ came to save those who have tried to better themselves, who have performed well, who's better than the next guy.

Surely he has come to save those who are obedient, those who have a clean track record. Peter tells us, no. Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.

Let's get one thing straight. When we look at the cross, this is an instrument of torture and execution for criminals. The guilty party would hang there on the cross to die.

[12:01] But there's just one problem, right? Jesus wasn't guilty. The Son of God lived a perfectly righteous life. He was sinless inside and out.

Every single thought, every single word, every single action, every single intention of his heart was completely, 100%, totally pure, totally honoring to God as Father for his entire life.

Romans 6 tells us that the wages of sin is death. He is the only one who can say with 100% certainty, I have not earned death by my life.

There is only one man who has been truly, perfectly righteous, and yet here he is, willingly going to the cross, willingly enduring suffering, willingly being humiliated, and eventually dying a criminal's death.

Why? Christ substituted himself in the place of his people. The righteous for the unrighteous.

[13:12] This was the eternal plan of God before the ages began. God determined, he made a plan, he's going to magnify his glory. How? By sending his own perfect son to live and to die and to rise for sinners like us.

When we look at the cross, we need to remember three key words. I try to remind us of this from time to time. All of this happened in my place. The suffering that Christ endured was in my place. That's what I've earned. And the death that Christ has died was in my place. That's the death that sinners deserve, not him. The wrath of God that was poured out on him at the cross, that's what I deserve, but Jesus bore it in my place.

Which is exactly why we celebrate this ugly instrument of torture. It's because by God's grace, this horrible symbol of death is transformed into this gift of eternal life.

Christ died in our place. He didn't come for good people or righteous people or people who have it all together or people who think they can work themselves up to God.

[14:32] There are no such people. We all belong in this category of the unrighteous. We have earned his wrath, but by his grace, he has given us his love.

The righteous died for the unrighteous. As we see in 2 Corinthians 5.21, he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Do you see why we celebrate the cross? It's because by his grace, the symbol of our death and sin has now been transformed into the symbol of our life in Christ.

But I have one final question this evening. Third, why would he do this? Why would he do this?

There's many answers that you can give, good biblical answers, correct, theologically accurate answers.

Christ died in our place to purchase the forgiveness of sins. Yes, that's true. Amen. Christ died in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, to give his people eternal life.

[15:52] Yes, absolutely. Christ died in our place to defeat the powers of sin and darkness. All of that's true. Amen. But there is an even greater purpose than this.

What is it? The final phrase here tells us, Christ also suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.

Why? Why? That he might bring us to God. If you can believe it, there is an even better gift to receive than the forgiveness of all of our sins.

That forgiveness of sins is a glorious gift. Can you believe that? Every wrong that you have ever done, every wrong thought, every wrong action, every wrong deed, every ounce of you that's dishonoring to God is washed clean by the blood of Christ.

That is a wonderful gift. But there's an even greater purpose than this. This forgiveness of sins, that's a necessary condition for the ultimate purpose of the cross.

[17:06] What is it? It's that sinners like us might be brought into the presence of a holy and glorious God. I mean, think about it.

Why is eternal life such a good gift? It's because we get to live it in the presence of God. Why is it so wonderful that Jesus has conquered sin and death and the devil at the cross?

It's because now, every single obstacle that would keep us from enjoying God forever has been buried and executed at the cross of Christ. The greatest gift of the gospel and the greatest purpose of the cross is that sinners like us can now enjoy God in all of His glory for the rest of eternity.

Can you imagine? This is why Christians celebrate this horrible thing. It's because Jesus' death in our place has now brought us to God.

You know, every single religion asks that question. How can man be made right to God? How can man make it to God? Every single religion that you know of seeks to answer this question of how do I bridge this gap between God and man?

[18:27] And they all have their own version of the same answer, don't they? They all give some list of requirements, some action, some steps to take, some things you must do, the type of person you must be.

The gospel alone says, God has come to us to bring us to Him. The gospel alone says, you need not make yourself better.

You need not make yourself stronger to make your way to Him. In fact, guess what? The Son of God has become weak in order to save the weak. He has become sin for us in order that we might become the righteousness of God.

He has subjected Himself to the powers of death. He has suffered once for sins in order to bring us to God so that now, if you are united to Him by faith, and that's a big if, in fact, if you have not yet repented of your sin and put your faith in Jesus, what better time than now?

But if you have repented of your sin and if you have put your faith in Christ, Christian, you now have peace with God.

[19:49] And you have a certain future ahead of you of enjoyment of His glory for the rest of eternity. Friend, do you grasp the meaning of the cross? Is it for you just a symbol, something familiar, something you can point out, or is it the image of your salvation?

We're going to close this evening by partaking of communion together. And as we do, you'll hear what's probably a familiar song, but it's one of my favorite hymns, and I love it because it very simply and clearly asks some important questions.

What can wash away my sin? The answer? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Nothing can for sin atone. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Not of good that I have done. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all my hope and peace. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. This is all my righteousness. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

[21:06] Father, we praise you this evening for the blood of Jesus that washes away every sin. We thank you, Father, for his death in our place.

We thank you for his perfect life in our place. And we thank you for the fact that he does not remain in the grave, but he has risen from the grave in victory over everything that would keep us from you.

We pray, Father, if there are any here who don't know you by faith, would you give them now the gift of regeneration? God, would you make them new creations by putting their faith in Christ this moment?

And Father, would you encourage us, Father, as we look to the cross and remember Christ also suffered once for us, for sins, the righteous, for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.