

The Heart *of the* Cross



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 18:22-33; Rom. 3:9-20; 5:12, 15, 18; 2 Cor. 5:14.*

Memory Text: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

“**A**s the sin bearer, and priest and representative of man before God, He [Christ] entered into the life of humanity, bearing our flesh and blood. The life is in the living, vital current of blood, which blood was given for the life of the world. Christ made a full atonement, giving His life as a ransom for us. He was born without a taint of sin, but came into the world in like manner as the human family. He did not have a mere semblance of a body, but He took human nature, participating in the life of humanity. . . .

“Jesus Christ . . . clothed His divinity with humanity. . . . By coming as man Christ could die. By death He overcame death. The death of Christ bore to the death him who had the power of death, and opened the gates of the tomb for all who receive Him as their personal Saviour.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 925, 926.

The Week at a Glance: What happened at the Cross? Why did Christ have to die? How was the concept of substitution prefigured in the story of Abraham in which he and the Lord discuss the destruction of Sodom?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 5.

For the Sake of the Righteous

Though the Cross has stood at the center of the Christian faith from the earliest days up through today, debate has raged in the church over such basic questions as What happened at Calvary? Why did Jesus die? Did He have to die? What killed Christ? What did His death accomplish? Who was benefitted from His death? Though Paul said that he was determined not to know “any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2*), the followers of Christ in the following centuries have not always agreed on just what “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” means.

Read Genesis 18:22-33 (if not familiar with the story, read the whole chapter). Notice the specific interaction between Abraham and the Lord. What principle is being expressed here that, in a powerful way, teaches an important truth about the Cross?

To understand the significance of these texts, it’s crucial to see what Abraham *didn’t* ask the Lord. He didn’t ask that the righteous be spared instead of the wicked. He didn’t say “Lord, let the righteous go; destroy the wicked.” Instead, He asked that the Lord “spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein” (*Gen. 18:24*). And the Lord responded that “I will spare all the place *for their sakes*” (*vs. 26*). All the way through the dialogue, this same idea comes back: “for the sake of” the 45, the 40, the 30, the 20, or the 10 the Lord would spare the whole city, the wicked and all.

Here’s the Bible’s first clear explication of the crucial theme of the Cross: *Because of the righteous*, the wicked are spared. It was going to be the righteousness of another, of someone other than the “wicked” themselves, who would spare the wicked from the punishment that they deserved. For the sake of someone else, others are saved.

Read again the dialogue between Abraham and the Lord. Notice how readily the Lord agreed to lower the terms of the agreement. What does that tell us about God’s desire to save us?

The Human Condition

Yesterday's study opened up a crucial theme: the wicked saved for the sake of the righteous. In the story of Sodom, however, the righteous who were needed to save the city were not found. There weren't even ten people whose righteousness would have been deemed sufficient to spare these sinners from destruction.

In a sense, the inhabitants of the whole world are like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe our sins aren't as outrageous or as violent as were those of the Sodomites (*Gen. 19:5*), but they're bad enough. (On the other hand, considering some of the horrendous crimes through which the world suffers now, maybe we're worse.) And, in a sense, too, the whole world faces the same judgment that Sodom and Gomorrah did.

The Bible is abundantly clear: Whether one lived in Sodom or elsewhere, every human being is a sinner; every human being has violated the law of God. No one, anywhere, has the righteousness to save himself or herself, much less anyone else, from judgment.

Read Romans 5:12, 15, 18. **What was the cause of our human sinfulness?**

How is this sinfulness manifested in humanity? *Rom. 3:9-20.*

We are sinful, not only because of what we have done but because of what Adam had done. We are naturally the children of Adam. When he sinned, his nature became corrupted, fallen, sinful, and we inherited this same nature from him, somewhat in the same way that we inherit traits from our parents. We weren't literally in Adam when he sinned (as though we had some form of preexistence prior to our birth); we have simply reaped in ourselves the consequences of his fall, which is why we, having inherited sinful natures, commit sin. It's because of this connection with Adam that we all face the condemnation that sin brings.

Peel away all social, cultural, and even religious façades and look at yourself: Are your natural tendencies, your natural drives, toward good or toward evil, toward God or toward self? How does the answer confirm the Bible teaching about human sinfulness?

One Man's Righteousness

What do these texts say about the character of Jesus? *John 8:46, Rom. 5:18, 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Pet. 2:22, 1 John 3:5.*

Yesterday we looked at the universal problem of humanity, and that's sin. In contrast to every other person, however, there's Jesus, whom the Bible teaches did not sin. In other words, He was the only Person not tainted or infected by sin in any way. He kept the law of God perfectly, always obeyed the Father's will, and never once fell. In this sense, He stands out as different from every other human being.

Now, let's go back to the principle we looked at Sunday: that of the guilty being spared for the sake of the righteous. There were no righteousness men found in Sodom and Gomorrah, nor are there any found in the world at large. Jesus, however, is the exception, and the Lord will accept Christ's righteousness alone as sufficient to spare the world. It's as though, instead of ten righteous men to save Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lord allowed for one righteous Man to save a guilty world—and that Man was Jesus. *See John 3:17.*

Romans 5:17-19 says that everything Adam had done through sin, Christ came to undo. Adam brought sin, death, condemnation, and disobedience; Christ brought righteousness, life, justification, and obedience. Thus, just as it was only through Adam that we all became sinners, it's only through Christ that we become righteous. Hard as it is to understand, His righteousness was so perfect, so complete and satisfactory, that it was enough to cover the sins of the whole world. And that's because His righteousness was "the righteousness of God" (*Rom. 3:21*). Because Jesus Himself was God, and only God Himself could provide the righteousness needed to save a fallen world.

Sure, you're a wretch, and even if you hide that fact from everyone else, you can't hide it from God. But no matter how bad you are, isn't God's righteousness, which can cover the sins of the whole world, enough to cover even you? Think about the implications of your answer.

The Justice of God

So far this week we've seen that God will spare sinners for the sake of another's righteousness and that Jesus alone had the righteousness to cover the sins of the world. But if that's true, then why did Jesus have to die? Wasn't His righteousness alone enough? Why the terrible death at Calvary?

These are good questions, and part of the answer lies in the limits of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, which gives only one aspect of the principles involved in the science of salvation.

Suppose, indeed, that there were ten righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, and, as a result, the cities were spared destruction. We would have seen here a great manifestation of God's mercy, for certain. Out of mercy, He spared these people the punishment that was justly theirs.

Now, in somewhat the same way, we've also seen that Christ's righteousness alone was enough to spare the whole world from the punishment of sin. This, too, represents an act of mercy.

Mercy, however, is only part of the picture. There's another element that cannot be overlooked regarding the character of God and His dealing with sin.

Look up the following texts. What point are they making about the Lord? How can we reconcile them with our understanding of a merciful God? *Exod. 34:7, Job 8:3, Ps. 89:14, Jer. 23:5, Acts 7:52.*

All these texts touch on a crucial issue regarding the plan of salvation: the justice of God. The Bible says that God is just, and this leads to an important point: Again, suppose there were ten righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah and the places were spared. That would be mercy, but it certainly wouldn't be justice, would it? There were some pretty vile, crude, violent people in those cities, were there not? Should they have gotten off free, with no punishment for their sins? Christ's righteousness is enough to cover every sin of every sinner in the world, no matter how vile, violent, and rude. If all were to go free, with no divine punishment, that would be mercy, but would it be justice?

Put yourself in a situation in which you need to execute judgment. And though you want to be merciful, fairness and responsibility also demand justice. How does such a dilemma reflect the issue before God: how to be both merciful with fallen sinners and yet, at the same time, be just with them, as well?

One Died for All

Here's where we get to the heart, the mystery, the majesty, the shame, the justice, and the glory of the Cross.

God wanted to forgive sinful humanity, but to do it in a just manner, one that would not condone sin or leave it unpunished. But how could He do that? Only one way: He poured out against Him—in the Person of Jesus—His own righteous wrath against sin. In other words, because sin needed to be punished, *He punished it in Himself through Jesus at the cross*. That's what the Cross is all about: God taking upon Himself the punishment for our sins.

A just God will not let sin go unpunished, but the good news is that God punished all sin in the Person of Jesus, who died there in our stead. Every human being deserved what Jesus faced at the cross; but now, because of the Cross, no human being should, ideally, ever have to face this punishment.

“One died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14, NIV). What Paul's saying is that Christ died as our representative; He died the death that we deserve. In that sense (and that sense only), Paul could say that we all died. What he means is that Christ's death stands as our death, the death we deserve for our sins but don't have to face because Jesus, as our representative, died it for us.

In the end, God would either inflict punishment on others for their sins, which would have resulted in their eternal death, or He would take that punishment upon Himself and save others from it. The Cross shows that which He chose to do: face His own judgment against sin.

“The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy.”—John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 159.

Read each of these texts: **Isaiah 53:5, Romans 5:8, Galatians 3:13, Ephesians 5:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:10.** In what ways do you see revealed in these texts the substitutionary aspect of what Christ has done for us?

It's so important that we understand what the Cross is about. God took upon Himself the punishment of sin that we deserve. Whatever imagery or symbolism or metaphor is used to talk about the Cross, we must never get away from this fundamental truth, that of substitution. Any theology that downplays or marginalizes the substitutionary aspect of Calvary downplays and marginalizes the heart of the plan of salvation.

Further Study: “Our sins were laid on Christ, punished in Christ, put away by Christ, in order that his righteousness might be imputed to us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. Although sin was charged to his account on our behalf, yet he remained perfectly sinless.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1895.

“Hating sin with a perfect hatred, He yet gathered to His soul the sins of the whole world. Guiltless, He bore the punishment of the guilty. Innocent, yet offering Himself as a substitute for the transgressor. The guilt of every sin pressed its weight upon the divine soul of the world’s Redeemer. The evil thoughts, the evil words, the evil deeds of every son and daughter of Adam, called for retribution upon Himself; for He had become man’s substitute. Though the guilt of sin was not His, His spirit was torn and bruised by the transgressions of men, and He who knew no sin became sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 322.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Think about this whole idea of substitution. What aspects of this concept do you find disturbing? How fair is it that someone else should suffer the penalty for your wrongdoing? At the same time, considering the perfect holiness of God in contrast to the sinfulness of humanity, why is substitution the only way the Lord could have forgiven human beings their sins while, at the same time, maintaining His justice?
- 2** Why is the deity of Christ so important in order to understand the Cross? After all, even if Jesus were only a man, why would the death of a single man, even one who was sinless, not be adequate to atone for the sins of the world?
- 3** Go back and review the Old Testament–sacrificial system. Where do you see the concept of substitution prefigured in those sacrifices?

Kapi's Transformation

by Bonnie Norton

In 1999, Robin Kasi, district pastoral director in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, made a trip into the bush to visit and encourage the Adventist congregations scattered in the mountains. He decided to visit the village of Kapi to see if the people would receive a missionary to work among them. But the villagers angrily chased Pastor Kasi away with bush knives, bows, and arrows. Kasi barely escaped with his life. For days he trekked through rugged terrain, arriving home half starved and bedraggled.

Not long after this, Trevor Robinson, then director of Adventist Aviation Services in Papua New Guinea, flew some pastors to different isolated churches for Sabbath services. At one village a Protestant missionary approached and told him about a woman who needed immediate medical care in Kapi. Other air services refused to fly her out without payment, and the family could not pay the fare. "I know it is your Sabbath," the missionary said, "but could you fly this woman out?"

"Absolutely!" Robinson said, and he took off for Kapi.

When Robinson, a registered nurse, arrived in Kapi, he found the woman so badly injured that parts of her skull and spinal cord were exposed. He was not sure whether she would survive the trip, but he flew her to the hospital.

Amazingly, the woman recovered, and the villagers were so touched by Robinson's kindness that they agreed to let a nursing team visit their village once a quarter.

When Pastor Kasi learned that the nursing team was going into Kapi, he insisted on accompanying them, even though they had tried to kill him earlier. This time, because he was with the nursing team, they left him alone. All day long the nurses ministered to the various health needs of the village. That evening Pastor Kasi tacked a felt board to the side of a hut and told Bible stories to the villagers. The villagers who had tried to kill him before now listened attentively.

Each time the nursing team visits Kapi, they end their visit with Bible stories. Slowly the barriers are breaking down. Recently the village elders told the nursing team, "Our entire village wants to become Adventists. Will you please send a missionary to come and live with us and teach us?"

Similar experiences in other villages prove that the medical work, coupled with a heart for souls, is one sure way to open doors in the uttermost parts of God's kingdom.

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