

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?

Key Text: *2 Corinthians 5:12, 15, 18.*

Teachers Aims:

1. To discuss what Jesus' death accomplished and whom it benefited.
2. To contrast our sinfulness with Jesus' righteousness.
3. To invite class members to marvel at, and to accept, God's willingness to take upon His sinless self the punishment for our sins.

Lesson Outline:

I. By Death Christ Overcame Death (*1 Cor. 2:2*).

- A. A study of the Cross is central to Christian faith.
- B. As foreshadowed by Abraham's dialogue with God, the wicked are spared for the sake of the righteous.

II. The Human Condition (*Rom. 3:9-20*).

- A. Every human being is born a sinner; every human being has violated the law of God.
- B. We have reaped the consequences of Adam's fall.
- C. Christ's righteousness alone is sufficient to spare humanity.

III. A Substitute (*Isa. 53:5*).

- A. Only God Himself could provide the righteousness needed to save a fallen world.
- B. The Old Testament sacrificial system presents a very personal message of hope to each of us.

Summary: Jesus clothed His divinity with humanity in order to become a Substitute and Surety for us. When Jesus accepted the punishment we deserved for our sins, He became our Substitute as prefigured by the Old Testament sacrificial system. God's mercy met the needs of His just requirements. We have reaped the benefits of His amazing accomplishment. This is the central truth of the Cross.

COMMENTARY

The Heart of the Cross.

Introduction. Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross meets the spiritual need of the human race. The effective value of His sacrifice is no more bound by time or place than is His sovereignty over all the universe. The Cross of Jesus achieves results that are vast as eternity and deep as His wisdom and love.

I. For the Sake of the Righteous.

God spared the human race for the sake of one righteous Man, the God-Man, Jesus Christ. This truth is crowningly brought to

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?

view in Romans 5, a chapter that merits the closest study. “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (vs. 6). This work of redemption Christ alone could accomplish (under the blessing of the Father and the Spirit). See how often and in what senses the word *one* is used in Romans 5, especially with reference to Christ’s unique and all-paying sacrifice for our redemption from sin and restoration in His righteousness through the power of His grace.

II. The Human Condition.

For the sake of justice and love, sin—this massive leprosy of spreading evil—must not be permitted to run rampant. “Through sin the whole human organism is deranged, the mind is perverted, the imagination corrupted. Sin has degraded the faculties of the soul. Temptations from without find an answering chord within the heart, and the feet turn imperceptibly toward evil.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 312; see also *Isa. 1:2-6*. In order to appreciate the powerfully curative effects of the gospel, we must have a clear concept of the magnitude and severity of the moral disease it remedies.

III. One Man’s Righteousness.

Long before sin assumed its present monstrous forms, the Lord foresaw the whole extent of the problem and made provision for evil to be eradicated from the sinner’s heart without eradicating the sinner. (See *1 Pet. 1:18, 19*.) God would not, and could not, compromise His standard of moral perfection to accommodate our fallen nature, but He could, and did, offer an effective plan whereby humanity’s lost perfection might be restored through grace and evil be rooted out of the universe forever. Christ shouldered the whole burden of our need. He brought to bear the whole weight of His righteousness and reconciling love to redeem us from our condition as enemies of God, enemies of one another, and enemies of ourselves. What He did was so vast and complete as to need no supplementation but, simply, application to our acceptant hearts. Read and absorb Romans 5:8-21. This chapter is an observatory into the limitless expanse of the gospel.

IV. The Justice of God.

“God’s love has been expressed in His justice no less than in His mercy. Justice is the foundation of His throne, and the fruit of His love. It had been Satan’s purpose to divorce mercy from truth and justice. He sought to prove that the righteousness of God’s law is an enemy to peace. But Christ shows that in God’s plan they are indissolubly joined together; the one cannot exist without the other. ‘Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’ Ps. 85:10.

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.

“By His life and His death, Christ proved that God’s justice did not destroy His mercy, but that sin could be forgiven, and that the law is righteous, and can be perfectly obeyed. Satan’s charges were refuted. God had given man unmistakable evidence of His love.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 762.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Psalm 89:14; Romans 5:12, 15, 18; 1 Corinthians 2:2; 2 Corinthians 5:21.*

- ① When Abraham initiated his dialogue with God in Genesis 18:22-33, he likely could not see forward to the outcome. It points to a crucial theme of the Cross: Because of the righteous, the wicked are spared. How does God’s willingness to save us encourage and inspire you? How does this help you forgive and serve those who have falsely accused or hurt you?
- ② Among siblings, at times, it seems that parents punish everyone to be sure they have not missed anyone! We deserve the consequences of Adam’s choice; yet the Cross provides a benefit we do not deserve. What does it mean “the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow[s] to the many!” (*Rom. 5:15, NIV*)? How would you explain this amazing gift to an unchurched friend or neighbor?
- ③ When we discuss the politics of our world, one subject that often surfaces is “balance of power.” As you consider the attributes of God, compare and contrast His mercy and His justice (*see Ps. 89:14*). How have you been blessed by His mercy? Why is His justice regarding sin and salvation so important to you, both now and in the future?
- ④ Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:2, presents his most important doctrine: “I resolved to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (*NIV*). How does this compare with the topics or ideas that provide the focus for your life? In what ways could you learn to join Paul in his passion for proclamation?
- ⑤ The Old Testament sacrificial service pointed to a substitute for the unrighteous (*see Isa. 53:5*). Because sin had to be punished, God punished it in Himself through Jesus on the cross. Every human deserves what Jesus experienced. How does your undeserved innocence, granted by Jesus’ death, improve your self-concept? What words or actions will you use to share the wonder of Jesus’ love in a practical way?

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?

Witnessing

RANSOMED!

What a strongly evocative word, igniting a full range of emotions and passion in the hearts of human beings. To be ransomed, one must first be captured. A mental picture immediately forms: a captive, hidden from loved ones, lost to those who love and care deeply about him or her. The victim experiences confinement; movements may be restricted. Despair sets in, numbing in its intensity. The captive feels violated, grief-stricken, frightened, and so very much alone. Despondency and a sense of hopelessness engulf the captive, who is held long enough. The future seems to be a black void; a sense of gloom permeates the very soul.

And then, the longed-for happens—the captive is ransomed! Freedom has been arranged. Liberation takes place. Release occurs. Rescue happens!

Two thousand years ago, humanity was ransomed; the death sentence was lifted, and the sweet gift of eternal life took its place. Who paid the ransom? Jesus Christ paid the ransom! His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary was full punishment for our sins.

Who was to be ransomed? You. The man up the street. The woman in the next town. The convict in prison. All have been offered eternal life. Life everlasting is available to everyone living—good or bad. It does not get better than that!

So, how is it that everyone is not absolutely thrilled beyond measure at this good news? Is it possible those of us who are blessed with the full knowledge of this inestimable gift are not sharing the good news adequately with those who know nothing about it? Should we question some of our methods? Or, perhaps it is our lack of commitment? Do we think we will have plenty of time to witness when our lives calm down a bit, the children are grown, or we move into retirement? Are we squandering our resources (time, money, energy) in other ways that really do not matter in the long run? Or is it possible we simply do not realize the magnitude of the gift we have been given?

Whatever the rationale we use, we cannot make excuses any longer for our inactivity. Take a step in a new direction toward witnessing today. Invite your co-worker to the church picnic as an ice-breaker. Keep a handful of little witnessing pamphlets on hand at all times—share one with your seatmate on the plane, give one to the baby-sitter, along with payment, or tape a card with an inspiring message on it to the garbage bags when you put them on the curb. We need to get out there and share the good news. Target not only the easy ones to witness to but especially those who are the most difficult to reach with the message that heaven can be theirs, that the ransom has been paid, and sin has been vanquished—for Jesus Christ fulfilled all the requirements of the plan of salvation.

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.

V. One Died for All.

This fact itself attests to the infinite, divine nature of Christ. No merely created being would have the power and moral resources to be an effectual substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. Only the Originator of life could absorb the collective problem of sin into Himself and so deal with it as to redeem sinners, destroy sin, and impart righteousness where it had not previously been. The work of redemption is a work of re-creation enfolded in justice, mercy, wisdom, and love (*see Eph. 1:1-12, Col. 1:12-23*). What an overlooked and undervalued provision in this sinful world!

“It will take the whole of eternity for man to understand the plan of redemption. It will open to him line upon line; here a little and there a little.”—Ellen G. White, MS 21, 1895.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Imagine you are in traffic school. Everyone has to tell how they got their ticket. Tell us about a ticket you received.

Verses for Group Focus: *Romans 5:15-19*.

Thought Questions:

- ① Based on Romans 5:15-19, create a chart contrasting Adam’s act and its results with Jesus’ act and its result.
- ② What was Jesus’ “one act of righteousness”? (*vs. 18, NIV; see also Rom. 3:25, 26*).

Application Questions:

- ① We usually deserve the traffic tickets we receive; yet, no one deserves to die in an accident or suffer from incurable cancer. Likewise, it is not fair that any of us should suffer because of Adam’s sin. What does Romans 5:15-19 tell us about how God dealt with such injustices?
- ② Could someone pay your traffic fine for you? What would it be like if someone did? What if he or she paid the increased cost of your insurance also? How would you feel about someone who did this? How would you respond to that person?
- ③ Jesus took our sin that we might have His righteousness. He became our Substitute. In what ways does a Christian act as a substitute for those around him or her?

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?**