

THE TIMES OF THE CROSS

WEEK 1: PLANNED IN ETERNITY

In the seven years that I have been giving these talks, I am pretty certain that I have covered every major theme of the Easter topic. However, this year what struck me most was what I had NOT made a focus of the talks – the Cross itself. The question that came to my mind was: Why in the last 2000 years did an “the emblem of suffering and shame” become to Christians, the “wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died”; and 2000 years later is the emblem known all over the world as the symbol of Christianity? And when I did a bit of reading on the topic of the Cross itself, I found that it took time for it to become the Christian emblem, because it was well into the second century AD before Christians started to publicly use it as their symbol. The main reasons for this were

- The horror and shame associated with death on a cross throughout the Roman empire.
- It took time for the church to emerge in the different parts of the Roman Empire
- Persecution (Nero) – publicly displaying the cross would not have been safe.
- Knowledge and understanding of all the cross stood for only became widespread with the circulation of the New Testament letters and gospels
- Heresy, like that in Galatia, which undermined the importance of the cross for salvation

The prevailing attitudes to the horror and shame a cross signified, the time it took for the Christian message to spread through the empire, and the dangers and heresies Christians faced, prevented the cross from being immediately adopted as the Christian emblem. Its adoption as the emblem of Christianity was only made certain when Constantine put a cross on his banners and attributed his victory at Milvian Bridge in 312AD to the vision he had about it. Eusebius records that on the eve of this battle, the Emperor Constantine saw a cross of light in the sky along with the latin words which meant ‘conquer by this sign’. He adopted the cross as his emblem, had it emblazoned on his army’s standards and went on to win the battle.

So, in terms of human time, it took three centuries for the cross to come to prominence as a Christian symbol. When we come to considering when it came to prominence in the divine perception of time, however, the Cross becomes not just an emblem fixed in a human historical time frame, but one of great significance in the eternity before time began and lasting into the eternity when time is no more.

We usually think of eternity in terms of the eternity that is to come at the end of this world. We seldom think of the eternity that existed before our world was created. Mainly that is because the Bible tells us so little about it. Eternity in the sense of the divine domain has always existed. The existence of the universe as we know it, is an additional dimension of that eternity and one which is designed to last in its present form only for a period of measurable time. Maybe I’m wrong, but science fiction’s ideas of parallel universes and time travel have tried to make sense of realms beyond our imagination and portray the idea that we can travel back and forward in time in the blink of an eye. When we accept that God and His domain exist outside all our ideas of time and distance, we start to realize that all that we know and experience in this world was all pre-planned – literally from the moment of creation of our known world to its final form. There was a beginning long before God decided to create our universe. Genesis 1-5 fascinates me because it is the clearest indication that something else existed before the world as we know it came into being. And whatever existed did so outside any concept we have of time or distance.

Genesis 1:1-5 (NIV) In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light

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“day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Time itself only began when God separated the light from darkness, but there is no indication in Genesis that a period of light plus a period of darkness equaled what we now measure as 24 hours. We also know that if God created the heavens and the earth then He already existed in a domain beyond what He was about to create. And it is that domain which contains both the greatest mysteries and the most perplexing and inexplicable questions about Christianity. The Bible gives very little information about it, but if we are to understand how the cross became the emblem of our faith, that information is where we must start. We start with God’s plans for His universe.

Now we all know about plans. Way back in 1786, when Robert Burns upturned a mouse nest while he was ploughing a field, he wrote a poem about it, with a line that has now become proverbial – the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. Never was a truer word said because we all know that even the best laid plans often go wrong. Human fallibility means that no human plan can ever be 100% sure of success. That is why a consideration of God’s plans is an important starting point. We all make plans for hours, days, weeks, and maybe even years ahead. Can any of us even contemplate what our minds would be like if we had to plan from one eternity to another? We plan for special occasions that may be attended by a large number of people. Can you imagine what it would be like planning for the world population, now reaching 7 billion and likely to increase even more in the future, not just for one occasion, but for the whole of time and beyond? Can you imagine what it would be like if you had to take, not just the whole world population, but every one of their individual circumstances for every point in time into account when you were making your plans? Quite honestly, our minds just couldn’t cope – it literally would be mind-blowing. If the ordinary pressures of life are causing us such stress just in our own short existence compared to eternity, then we get an idea of just how small and helpless we are in the grand scheme of God’s vision and plans for our planet.

God’s plans encompassed all that is involved in the questions mentioned. Human minds cannot plumb the height, the depth or the breadth of what God has planned, simply because we cannot comprehend what it is like to be an eternal, omnipotent and omniscient Being. So, some things we have to leave to faith. But when it comes to the Easter events, some questions come to our minds, not because we want to know everything, but because certain things in God’s plans are hard to understand from a human perspective. We can accept that the world needed and still needs a Saviour. But did the world have to be saved by the crucifixion of God’s only Son. And, a crucial question – why did the manner of His death have to be a cross? “The emblem of suffering and shame” as the hymn writer has put it. Surely, an omnipotent and omniscient God could have figured out another way? There is no easy answer to those questions. Yet, in the Bible we get glimpses of why salvation history has followed the course it has over millennia.

And glimpses are all we get of the source of the problem of sin that led to Jesus’ death on a cross. Because the problem did not start with us. We know that in the eternity before time began that God and other heavenly beings existed. Our starting point is the angels. We might ask: why did God create the angels? If God is self-sufficient and doesn’t need any other living being or any other thing to add to an already perfect existence, why did He first create heavenly beings and then humanity and all the things that exist in our world? From Scripture we can discern three reasons for the existence of living beings and things. As David emphasized in the last Bible study, God is a God of love and He wants to share it; That makes God a God of relationships; God is the creator and sustainer of all that is beautiful and good and right and just. The heavenly beings were created in accordance with these attributes of God. Now, the Bible has a lot to say about angels and their functions, but only three are mentioned by name.

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Luke 1:19 (NIV) I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

Daniel 10:13 (NIV) But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.

Jude 1:9-10 (NIV) But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, “The Lord rebuke you!”

Gabriel is the most well-known for it was he who announced the birth of Jesus. He is also mentioned by name in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21 as the angel who told Daniel what his visions meant. We see Michael in the context of various conflicts and in Jude and in Revelation 12:7 he is the leader of the angels who confronts the third angel, whom John refers to as ‘the dragon’. And the origin of our problems find their source in the activity of this third angel.

We find him mentioned by name in the Old Testament. He is named Lucifer and it only when we consider what the Bible tells us about him that we begin to understand why sin and evil has blighted God’s perfect creation. We begin to understand why the of the problem of sin and evil had to be confronted and decisively defeated on the cross. Two OT passages give us clues as to his identity and nature.

Ezekiel 28:11-17 (NIV) The word of the Lord came to me: 12 “Son of man, take up a lament concerning the king of Tyre and say to him: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: carnelian, chrysolite and emerald, topaz, onyx and jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.

The passage in Ezekiel is rather long so I’ve just put the main points of it.

Ezekiel 28:11-17

- Seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty
- In Eden, the perfect environment and the holy mount – the presence of God Himself.
- Adorned with EVERY precious stone in settings of gold already prepared for his creation.
- Appointed as a guardian cherub – scholars believe this refers to guarding the throne of God.
- Blameless from the day he was created until he sinned and wickedness was found in him and he was expelled from heaven.
- Pride because of beauty set in and his splendor corrupted him.

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Isaiah 14:12-15 (NKJV) “How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Although the prophecy in Ezekiel is directed against the king of Tyre, scholars see allusions to the Genesis narrative in it and other Old Testament concepts. They are agreed, however, that the faults of the king of Tyre, chiefly pride and arrogance are the same faults which led to Lucifer being expelled from not just the Garden of Eden, but from Gods holy mountain, which was heaven itself. They are the very faults that will destroy Tyre. Then in Isaiah we get an explanation of these faults.

From these texts we can build up a picture of Lucifer. When we remember that in ancient times names indicated character, the name Lucifer, meaning Son of the Morning or Light bringer is one of great honour and gave him a very significant role in God’s plans for His creation. If he was a guardian angel of the throne of God, this gave him very high status in God’s domain. There is speculation that this kind of status involved a degree of rulership over the other angels and, as we shall see later, he managed to take some of the angels with him when he was expelled from heaven. From the description of his appearance, we can only conclude that in beauty and splendour he stood out among all the other angels. Not only perfect in beauty, but perfect in wisdom and blameless in character. If we were to describe any human being in this way, we could only come to the conclusion that God loved this person so much that He had lavished every good and perfect gift upon him/her. We could only conclude that God had destined this person for greatness because he had given him/her every advantage to achieve whatever they desired. It must be emphasized God did not create Lucifer to be evil, but gave him the opportunity to use his gifts for the benefit of creation. Among those gifts was the same gift He has given to every one of us – a free will.

God will not force anyone to love Him. God will not force us into having a relationship with Him. It has to be voluntary if it is to mean anything. In a fantasy novel I read, the architect of the fantasy world says at a crucial point, “I brought them into being without their help, but I cannot save them without their consent.” We often talk of deciding for Christ or making a commitment of faith. I know I never thought of coming to faith in terms of giving my consent to Christ to save me. Yet, there is that element involved because salvation is a gift and sometimes people find it hard to accept gifts in the spirit they are offered. So, in a sense we have to consent to receive the gift of salvation offered to us. Also, God will not force anyone to serve and worship Him. Again, this has to come from a willingness to see God for who and what He is and serve and worship because of our knowledge and understanding of those things. Lucifer was, if you like, an eye witness to everything about God. Yet, he used his free will to turn against God. The text in Isaiah reveals the heights of ambition he aspired to. Five times he is recorded as saying “I will” and the middle letter of pride is I. Not content to serve God, his pride led him to believe He could be God and rule over God’s domain. His throne would be greater than God’s. He put self on the throne.

This ambition sowed the seeds of rebellion.

Revelation 12:7-9 (NIV) Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. 8 But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 9 The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

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2 Peter 2:4 (NIV) For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment;

Jude 1:6-7 (NIV) And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.

Luke 10:18 (NIV) He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

We cannot be absolutely sure about what John is speaking of in Revelation. when he writes of a war in heaven. It can be interpreted in different ways. Certainly, some form of confrontation must have taken place because both Peter and Jude speak of angels who, like Lucifer were expelled from heaven. Jesus even states that He saw this happen. It would seem from these texts that other angels also followed Lucifer into rebellion against God or lost their position by subsequent disobedience. And rebellion and disobedience were the key characteristics of Lucifer’s continued defiance of God. Peter describes him as a roaring lion seeking to devour those who follow God’s way. John Milton in the poem Paradise Lost sums up this strategy. As far as Lucifer was concerned, he had made his choice, because he tells one of his fallen angels, that he will oppose God with every weapon he can muster. He will seek to bring evil from good, and in his view, it is better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

th' Arch-Fiend replied:--

"Fallen Cherub, of this be sure--

To do aught good never will be our task, but ever to do ill our sole delight,

As being the contrary to his high will Whom we resist.

If then his providence out of our evil seek to bring forth good,

Our labour must be to pervert that end, and out of good still to find means of evil;

and in my choice - to reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heaven.

Milton sums up Lucifer’s implacable opposition to God, his determination to do all in his power to subvert and destroy whatever was good and right and just; and his prevailing ambition to rule a kingdom, even if it was in hell. And towards that last aim, it was clear that just as God sought citizens for the kingdom of heaven, Satan would be seeking subjects to rule over in hell. Milton’s summary accords directly from the information we are given in the New Testament. That pride which led to rebellion against God and the attitudes of Lucifer as to being the implacable enemy of God and determined to thwart God’s goodness by every means at his disposal, is evident in the different names he has been given in the New Testament. The most well known are Satan and the devil. He is also known as Beelzebub ([Matthew 10:25](#); 12:24) Belial (2 Corinthians 6:15) Adversary (1 Peter 5:8-9) Dragon (Revelation 12:3-12; 13:1-4; 20:1-3) Serpent (2 Corinthians 11:3; Revelation 12:9) God of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4); Prince of this world ([John 12:31](#)); Prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:1-3) Accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10) Enemy/ Sower of discord ([Matthew 13:39](#)) Tempter (Matthew 4:3) [The wicked/evil one](#) (Matthew 13:19, 38) Thief/Destroyer/Wolf ([John 10: 10,12](#)) Roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8-9) Murderer/ Father of lies ([John 8:44](#))

The list is quite long and we don’t have the time to mention each one, but if you look at the contexts in which these were mentioned in the gospels and later in the letters, the scope of Satan’s power and malignancy can appear in many different guises and in many different situations. If Jesus regarded

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Satan as a real being who could cause so much damage and destruction to God's creation, we can understand, why God had to provide a means to combat Satan's ambitions.

All of this makes you wonder, why did God make His plans in this way? Were there no alternatives? Why did God create Lucifer in the first place? Did God not know he would use his undoubted power to rebel and continue to cause chaos, mayhem and destruction in all God sought to create and develop? Why did God give him this choice? Why did God allow him access to the Garden of Eden? Did God not know Adam and Eve would succumb to temptation? Why did He give them free will, knowing how one of His most splendid creations had used it against Him? And if He did know this would happen again, why create humankind in the first place and why then subject it to the taint of sin they could do nothing to remove?

You can see from these very difficult questions why God is sometimes accused of inventing and creating evil. That, in itself, is slander because God is perfect holiness. He cannot even think of evil and as Habbakuk states.

(1:13 NIV) Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.

But, even with Lucifer, the texts in Isaiah and Ezekiel affirm that what God created was in accordance with His love, His desire for a relationship with this being who was given perfection as an angelic being, and was brought as close to God as was possible in that dimension. We can speculate about possible answers to those questions and theologians have supplied many plausible answers. However, at the end of the day, faith must take the place of those which cannot be answered to our satisfaction. What we can be completely certain of is that God does not make mistakes. Because He is the Alpha and Omega He knew the beginning from the end. Because He is omnipotent – all powerful – He knew His plans could and would not fail and His purposes would be achieved. As mentioned, God will not force His will on anyone or anything. God made Himself vulnerable by granting all His creatures free will, and by that gift risked rejection. God's love, however, was not prepared to allow, Lucifer to have it all his own way and allow him the freedom to destroy His human creation for all eternity. Knowing what would happen God provided a clear choice between His way and Satan's way. God included in His blueprint the means by which Satan's power could be overcome by how people would exercise their free will. There is the admission that there will be a majority of earth's population who will go Satan's way. But equally, there will be those who will overcome evil and find their place in the kingdom of God. Ironically, it is the last book of our Bibles that tell us this.

Revelation 13:8 (NIV) All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.

Revelation 12:10-11 (NIV) For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony;

That decisive choice is symbolized by the cross. Satan expected it to represent his triumph over God's intentions for His creation by destroying its means of salvation. Instead, it signalled his inevitable defeat, for it negated his most powerful weapon – death itself. The cross thus becomes not just the emblem of God's victory in the war against Satan, but also an emblem which indicates how we have used the free will God gave to us. For the Christian the cross is the emblem that shows we have chosen God over Satan. We have accepted all the claims of the 'Lamb slain from the creation of the world'. It is the emblem of the acceptance of the fact that we cannot fathom the mind of God when He planned the whole of creation's history from before its emergence until its

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final demise and beyond. It is the emblem of the faith and trust that is convinced God does not make mistakes: He knows exactly what He is doing: and He has complete control of all He has planned as it continues on its journey to its final destination. The cross thus is revealed as the emblem that was planned in the eternity before the world began and will be the emblem of those who will enter the eternity God has planned for those who have made what it represents their choice in this life.

WEEK 2: THE FULLNESS OF TIME

I am repeating what I said last week that God does not make mistakes. His plans could not and would not fail to achieve their intended purpose. His control over them is absolute and the dynamic driving them is that of an omnipotent God. And while you might grant that the cross was in God's blueprint from the eternity that existed before time began, you will probably also wonder why the cross has only become the emblem of Christianity over the last 2000 years. Was there any connection between its conception and its reality? It is very true that the word 'cross' is not mentioned in the Old Testament. So, for thousands, and perhaps millions of years, there is no direct reference to the cross. If the cross was to be the most important event in human history, why do we not hear of it during all of this time?

The answer to that question lies in the difference between our perception of time and God's. Archeologists can trace human history back about 6000 years but in relation to the eternity before the world existed and the eternity when it ceases to exist, 6000 years is a very short time indeed. For example

Psalms 90:4 (NIV) A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

2 Peter 3:8 (NIV) But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

These verses means we can equate God's thousand years with 6 of our days or 24 hours. There were usually 3 night watches spread over a 12 hour period. That sort of reckoning leaves all human thoughts about God's timing totally irrelevant. What we can be sure of, however, is that God's plans have also been perfectly timed to reach each stage of their development and, throughout what we might consider a period of silence about the cross, God was revealing what it would represent progressively throughout the Old Testament period. The New Testament writers recognized this was God's method of making sure, when the time was right, there would be no misunderstanding about the importance of the cross.

Galatians 4:4-5 (NKJV) But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4-5 (MSG) But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman, born under the conditions of the law so that he might redeem those of us who have been kidnapped by the law.

Ephesians 1:8-10 (NKJV) which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather

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together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.

Ephesians 1:8-10 (MSG) He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.

The KJV and NKJV calls the time of the cross the ‘fullness of time’. In other words, it arrived on the world stage exactly when God had decided it should. It is also significant that Paul’s words indicate that God had made known what His plans were. It is possible Paul was only referring to Jesus’ crucifixion, but we also have seen how many times the New Testament writers connect Jesus’ sacrifice with Old Testament counterparts. All the references to Jesus they quote from the Old Testament show clearly that God was revealing Himself to His human creation as its history developed. It is remarkable that in the thousands of years from the creation of the world to the birth of Jesus, only people, places and events that related to everything connected to the cross was recorded as Scripture. It would be impossible in one talk to mention all the Old Testament references and the following are only a few examples of how God was pointing the way to the cross throughout what we might think of as a period of silence about it. Through all that was recorded God was revealing Himself because, as was mentioned last week, God is a God of love which He wants to share with humanity and a personal relationship based on that love can only happen if human beings have a way of knowing God. In a general sense, as Paul has told us, we can know God through the wonders of His creation. We can also know God through our innate sense right and wrong through our conscience. But throughout the Old Testament God was revealing who and what He was in many different ways, chief of which was speaking clearly to significant people in the Old Testament. From the moment in Genesis 1:3 where we read ‘And God said...’ God was communicating to humankind the direction of all the plans He had for them.

I’ve chosen 4 specific instances where this communication gives us a direct connection to the cross. Bearing in mind that what was happening on earth was an extension of the war that had started in heaven between God and Satan, we see the first earthly confrontation in the Garden of Eden. It was a confrontation that would continue for the duration of this world as the imagery of Revelation 12 implies.

Genesis 3:14-15 (NIV) So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, “Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

Revelation 12:4-5 , 13 & 17 (NIV) The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.....When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child..... Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

The Genesis text suggests that enmity will continue to exist between the woman and the serpent. While the imagery in Revelation 12 is fluid, the story is of the dragon trying to destroy the woman and the child who is about to be born. This a graphic portrayal of how Satan tried to destroy the infant Jesus. Both Mary and Jesus were protected by God then and if the woman in John’s vision

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also is an image of the church, then we can understand, the reference to the enraged Satan waging war against the offspring of the Church – those who hold fast to their testimony about Jesus. That is also under God's protection for Jesus Himself asserted that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. And, we also know that the time would come when Satan would be crushed, although He would be the means by which Jesus would suffer too. If Satan could not destroy Jesus, he would pull out all the stops to destroy His followers. The cross was the means by which Satan expected to accomplish this. The Garden of Eden confrontation set the scene for the spiritual warfare which will continue until God's kingdom is gathered in. The cross was to be the place where victory would be won. Knowing this, Satan's efforts to destroy all God's plans for His creation would be directed at human beings. The Old Testament catalogue of evil kings, priests and people give testimony to the extent of Satan's success in corrupting individuals and separating them from God. The cross, from this perspective, represents not just the place where the battle between good and evil would be finally settled; but also represents the means by which a fallen humanity can be brought back into a relationship with God.

The second episode appears in Genesis 22 and has direct parallels with the cross is when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The episode speaks of a father prepared to sacrifice his only legitimate and much loved son in obedience to God's command. Jesus was the only begotten Son (John 3:16) and God's love for Him was declared at His baptism and transfiguration. Also, we are all familiar with Jesus' statements that He had come to do the will of His Father. Paul puts it very starkly in Philippians 2:8.

"obedient, . . . even unto the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Other parallels include the sacrifice of both Isaac and Jesus taking place on a mountain and Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice on his shoulders as Jesus carried His wooden cross. However, where all the parallels break down is at the moment Abraham is about to slay his son. Isaac had asked his father about a lamb for the sacrifice and Abraham replied that God would provide the lamb. We remember John the Baptist telling his disciples

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

No other human being, even Abraham's son in whom the promise of a countless number of descendants, characterized by faith, was to be realized, could fulfill the role of Jesus. And His role was to sacrifice Himself on the cross. Perhaps the one prominent representation of the cross is that of sacrifice because this is a re-occurring theme, particularly when Moses appears on the scene. Here there are two significant episodes with direct links to the meaning of the cross. It is significant that this is where Jesus started when He explained the meaning of what had happened to Him to His disciples after the resurrection. The first is the Exodus from Egypt, made possible by the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the lintels, exempting the Israelites from the deaths of their first-borns, is one that remains prominent in the minds of Christians, because our Easter corresponds with the timing of the Jewish Passover feast, when Jesus died on the cross. Paul could not make this connection any plainer.

Luke 24:27-28 (NIV) And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 (NIV) Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

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There can be no doubt that when God spoke to Moses and the Israelites on this occasion, that event was to become a very meaningful reference to not only to the shedding of blood which prevented death, but also the means by which escape from slavery was made possible. Here we see the cross serving the same purpose. The means by which death is averted and the means to escape from the domain of Satan and enter the Promised Land of the kingdom of God. It is Jesus Himself who made the direct connection between the second episode and His death on the cross.

John 3:14-15 (NIV) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Numbers 21:6-9 (NIV) Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

The Israelites were constantly complaining and this time it was about the quality of the manna and the lack of water. On this occasion God showed His displeasure in no uncertain terms. There is much symbolism in this God’s method of dealing with the people’s sin, but the key message is that to be rid of their sin and be forgiven, they had to follow God’s way, not their own. There was no antidote to the snake venom to heal their own wounds. They could not fight the snakes and destroy them by their own efforts. No form of appeasement could prevent the snakes causing death. The people were helpless in the face of God’s wrath against their sin. If all that sounds familiar you can see why Jesus specifically mentioned this event. We are those people. We cannot help ourselves because sin is the festering, incurable wound that will eventually lead to a spiritual death. Only the cross represents the healing of the sinful soul and reconciliation to God and the restoration of the relationship with Him.

These episodes show us how God had spoken through Moses, but how did He speak through the prophets? Many centuries were to pass but from Elijah onwards God’s message through them was the sinful state of humanity, judgement to come if it failed to repent and the prophecy of the One who would come to save those who did so. I can only draw your attention to just these examples of the many messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. And the most familiar passage is in Isaiah. Together with a lesser known one in Zechariah a very clear message emerges.

Isaiah 52:13 (NIV) See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

Isaiah 53:4-5 (NIV) Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Zechariah 12:10 (NIV) “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

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God will send a divinely appointed Servant to be the means of the salvation of His people. While the reference in Isaiah 52 could refer only to Jesus being lifted up to the highest place of exaltation, that of being at the right hand of the Father in heaven, in John 3 Jesus specifically states that He will be 'lifted up' in relation to being nailed to a cross. Isaiah and Zechariah both indicate the physical abuse of being pierced. Crucifixion involved being pierced with nails and Jesus was also pierced by a spear. Being considered punished, afflicted and stricken by God would have been the normal view about anyone who died on a cross. Being crushed and wounded speaks of the pain suffered in such a death entailed.

There is no suggestion in Isaiah, however, that the widely held opinions of what the cross represented aroused pity. Isaiah, in a sense, adds insult to the injury by also revealing the attitudes of those who looked on a person suffering in this way.

Isaiah 53:3 (NIV) He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Such shame was attached to death on a cross that people regarded the victims as the lowest of the low. This is born out by the scorn and mockery Jesus endured while hanging on the cross. In these verses we see the reality represented by 'the emblem of suffering and shame'. But through Isaiah, God was also saying that while people in general would not understand the meaning of that suffering and shame, there would be those who would come to realize that the Suffering Servant who died such a death did it in their place.

The cross brings into very sharp focus our infirmities, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities. Human perceptions saw only the negative associations of the cross. God corrected that misunderstanding by also revealing through Isaiah, the worldwide positive associations. It represented a person's reprieve from suffering that fate because of his/her sin. It represented God's provision of a sacrifice acceptable to Him as atonement for the sins of the whole world. It represented the death of the only Person who could bridge the gulf between a Holy God and a sinful humanity.

Isaiah 53:10-12 (NIV) Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

In this translation we get the first indications of the justification made possible by the sacrificial, substitutionary death on the cross. Many offspring and a portion among the great speak of the victory of the cross and the means by which the Suffering Servant will draw many followers into God's kingdom.

It is true that modern day Christians only see the cross represented in these texts and in these ways with the benefit of hindsight, for we have the knowledge of how all of these symbols and prophecies of the cross were fulfilled centuries later. Nevertheless, they serve to show that when God conceived the cross as the primary instrument of salvation before the world began, He did not keep silent about its place in His plans. For us today all the indications of the cross in the Old

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Testament testify to the certainty of God achieving what He had purposed for His creation. They testify that God has planned in every detail exactly when and how those purposes will be achieved, and especially at what point in human history further revelation comes. Although in the context of a prophecy against Assyria, God's words to Isaiah have a universal application. The God who makes the plans to achieve His purposes has the power to make sure they reach their appointed goal. And when the time was right, in the fullness of time, all of what God had revealed to the prophets was brought together in the cross upon Jesus sacrificed His life for the atonement of our sin.

Isaiah 14:24 (NIV) The Lord Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.

Isaiah 14:26-27 (NIV) This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

WEEK 3: BEFORE THE CROSS

Galatians 4:4-5 (NKJV) But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

The Incarnation marked the fullness of time when God sent Jesus into the world to redeem the world by His death on the cross. Everything that pointed to the cross in the Old Testament was now set to be manifested to all. We can start by asking why God chose this particular moment in time to set in motion Jesus' journey to the cross. We go back to the fact that history is His-story. God knew a powerful empire that spanned the known world would emerge. He also knew that the establishment of the Roman Empire would have far-reaching influence even after its fall. God knew there would come a time when people would be able to travel by land and sea throughout this empire and beyond, to spread the message of the cross. God knew that throughout this empire a common language would enable communication of that message to many different nations and cultures. God knew that eventually the supreme leader of that empire would enable the cross to become Christianity's enduring emblem. In this dispensation of the fullness of the times even the circumstances of history converged to ensure the message of the cross reached as far and wide as possible, and to as many people as possible, from the very beginning of its proclamation

From this perspective too, the cross becomes tangible emblem of the God who keeps His promises because the fulfillment of those promises has been meticulously planned as to their timing and performance. In the case of Jesus' three-year ministry, what we can also be certain of is that Jesus' death on the cross was not only planned in detail by God, but happened according to the will of God. The cross therefore brings us face to face with God's purposes in sending Jesus to die in this way. We have already seen in the Old Testament references that people were God's primary concern. We saw that from the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, Satan would make the people created in God's own image his prime target. And what is recorded in the Gospels demonstrates beyond all doubt that the cross was to become the touchstone by which people could secure their eternal future. We see that before the cross, Jesus was already showing that there was an alternative way of living in both practical and spiritual terms and He was, in word and deed, the revelation of God's will and purposes for humanity salvation.

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Between the beginning of Jesus' public ministry up to the time of His arrest three particular areas of His life's work stand out. Miracles, His teaching and prophecy. We would be justified in claiming that each of these, in their own way, was the demonstration and proof that the kingdom of God which Jesus preached had now been inaugurated by His appearance on the world stage. But each of these areas related directly to what the cross would come to represent.

Taking miracles first, Jesus' reply to John endowed the miracles with more than their practical outcomes.

Matthew 11:2-5 (NIV) When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

It is clear that Jesus mentioned the miracles in the sense of signs or proof that He was the Messiah, but also that they signalled the salvation expected from the coming of the Messiah. In His words to John, Jesus was summarizing His first words spoken in the synagogue at Nazareth where He read virtually identical words from the prophecy of Isaiah. (Luke 4:16-20). Miracles indicated that Jesus anointed by God to proclaim through this ministry that God's decisive confrontation with Satan was imminent. The fate of Jesus would once and for all settle God's victory; one, which in turn would determine the eternal fate of humanity. In John's question there is the hint of unbelief or scepticism, and that is perhaps why Jesus mentioned His ministry would cause people to stumble and doubt His Messiahship. Perhaps that is why Jesus chose to highlight the tangible evidence of the miracles to show that it was God working through Him to bring about all that was prophesied about the Messiah.

Another reason for mentioning the miracles was the spiritual dimension attached to them.

Matthew 8:10 (NIV) When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."

Mark 2:5 (NIV) When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Mark 5:34 (NIV) He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Mark 10:51-52 (NIV) What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Faith was a key ingredient in these healing miracles of the centurion's servant, the paralysed man, the woman with the issue of blood and the blind man. The darkness faced by each of these people was the loss of hope of a better life, and especially in the case of Jews the burden of believing their disabilities signified God's curse. Interestingly, it was the faith of those who brought the paralysed man to Jesus that led to the sins of the man being forgiven. Faith involved in the miracles accompanied by the forgiveness of sin was a direct attack on Satan who had introduced these evils into the world through bringing about the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The cleansing miracles of leprosy speak of the cleansing of sin and forgiveness of the taint of sin, which would only be made

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possible by the sacrificial shedding of blood on the cross. But it would also undermine Satan's power by making a relationship with God a real possibility. The raising of the dead spoke of the possibility of eternal life in the kingdom of God, thus negating Satan's most potent weapon – physical and spiritual death. These miracles thus constituted the initial assaults on Satan's power to do evil, but the particular miracles that relate directly to the cross are those where Jesus cast out demons. These were direct battles between the power of God and the power of Satan because the demons recognized who Jesus was.

Matthew 8:28-29 (NIV) When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. 29 “What do you want with us, Son of God?” they shouted. “Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?”

Mark 1:33-34 (NIV) The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

The statement in Matthew is particularly remarkable, for it appears that the demons knew God had already planned the moment when they would finally be defeated and punished. And that appointed time had not yet arrived. Satan's first attempt, through temptation in the wilderness, to divert Jesus from His mission failed. Lane in his commentary on Mark states: “Jesus trial in the wilderness serves as an aspect of the struggle between God and Satan, in which Jesus plays a crucial role.” Casting out demons was a significant part of that struggle. Jesus saw demonic activity around Him and the exorcisms themselves showed the superiority of God's power over that of Satan. Apart from the Temptation in the wilderness and the persistent orchestration of opposition to Jesus, which eventually led to the cross, one of Satan's most cynical ploys was having the source of Jesus' power challenged by the Pharisees for the only choice was between that of God or Satan.

Matthew 12:24-28 (NKJV) Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.” But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Mark 3:28-30 (NIV) Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.” He said this because they were saying, “He has an impure spirit.”

Matthew Mark and Luke all record this encounter with the Pharisees. The accounts in Matthew and Luke are very similar but Mark adds an additional significant statement. Jesus' response was strong and uncompromising. Jesus pointed out how illogical it was to claim that Satan cast out his own followers. How could he hope to keep control over people through demon possession if he kept removing the demons from them. Knowing there were other exorcists in Jewish society, He challenged the Pharisees to say that their power came from Satan too. Logically, if Satan was the power behind Him, then he must be the power behind the others who were doing the same thing. The final barb was that if Satan was not the power behind Him, then the power He exercised could only come from God. Once that was admitted, then Jesus had to be recognized as God's appointed messenger who was preaching that the kingdom of God had arrived. That meant people who wanted to enter that kingdom had to look to Him for direction. The Pharisees were therefore faced

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with a direct challenge. If Jesus was God's appointed messenger, then opposing Him was tantamount to opposing God Himself.

The additional information in Mark is a reference to what Christians refer to as the 'unforgivable sin'. What Jesus was telling them was that to attribute the work of God to Satan was something that could not be overlooked. It amounted to defamation of character. It was a slanderous insult that revealed a total ignorance of, or a total lack of regard for God; or even a disbelief about the character of the God they were supposed to be teaching people about. Before the cross, resisting temptation and casting out demons was God's way of combatting Satan. Exorcisms warned Satan of his weakness and vulnerability in the face of God's power, hence his increasingly desperate opposition to Jesus and His mission. Satan was confident instigating the violent and shameful death of God's Son would be his ultimate triumph. Instead the cross was the emblem of his ultimate failure.

The cross also became the emblem testing people's response to Jesus' teaching. In His teaching Jesus made it very clear that people now had to make a choice. They no longer had an excuse, for He was with them in Person and presented the choice between a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. The bottom line of this teaching was that people had the choice of whether to believe in God or follow Satan. Up until that point in time, people could never be sure about their eternal fate. In the plain language of the parables Jesus told them God had now provided a way by which they could be certain. In what He taught in parables Jesus gave people graphic images of what the kingdom of God was like. There are more parables recorded by Luke than in any of the other Gospels. Jesus spoke about things in people's everyday lives. Searching for things that were lost, wheat and tares, fishing nets the practice of hiring labour for the day, relationships between masters and servants. Every parable contains a truth and revelation about God, His kingdom, what they needed to do to enter it. The parables also made clear that choosing to reject the invitation would incur judgement.

Furthermore in other teaching and especially in that of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presented to the people, the principles of the kingdom that the acceptance of the invitation to enter the kingdom entails.

Matthew 5:3-12 (NIV) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Luke 10:27 And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

While we quite rightly see discipleship defined in the Sermon, it also is a picture of the characteristics of the environment God has prepared for His people. Peace, harmony, kindness,

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mercy, compassion, a guaranteed inheritance, comfort after mourning, healing after persecution, righteousness and most important of all – love, the attribute, above all others that was sending Jesus to die on a cross. All that Jesus mentioned in this Sermon was the opposite to what ordinary people saw and were experiencing in their everyday lives. Injustice, corruption, brutality, insecurity, burdensome religious oppression and exploitation by the powerful were rife in society as they had been in the times when the prophets first exposed them in their writings. And behind all of these was the hand of Satan. It is when we look at the opposites of what the Sermon on the Mount describes, that we see the extent to which Satan has succeeded in his ambitions to encourage every form of evil, thereby perverting all the good God wants to do.

But, although people flocked to hear Jesus and were amazed at His teaching, the cross would be the real test of their sincerity. And that would also be the test of their belief about who Jesus was. We are all familiar with Jesus stating He had come from the Father and was returning to the Father before His crucifixion. It is true that was considered blasphemous and only the very brave would have dared to express their belief about this in public. However, Jesus did give people other statements that made clear in what people needed to believe about Him to obtain the eternal life He promised for belief in Him.

As the saying, which I've used before, puts it: "I AM. Two of the most powerful words for what you put after them shapes your reality."

I AM the Light of the world, the Bread of life, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Door of the Sheepfold, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life.

Given that Jesus' taught about every aspect of what God was proclaiming and working through Him, people were presented with the same choice, Lucifer had been given when he was created. Belief and willing obedience to all the blessings God offered leading to eternal life in heaven; or rejection leading to rebellion against Him and facing judgment that would leave them subject to Satan for the whole of eternity.

I think we could all agree that, when the alternatives are considered, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the I AM sayings give us a very positive and a very attractive picture of what serving and worshipping God involves. No doubt many followed Jesus while He held out these prospects before them. What would happen though when the prospect of the cross was added to this information.

Mark 8:31-33 (NIV) He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

John 6:64-69 (NIV) Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to

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whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Coming to Jesus’ prophecies of His death by crucifixion, it has to be admitted, that when it was realized that salvation involved belief and commitment to a crucified Saviour, for people of the time and since, revulsion and doubt would triumph over all the other teaching. In this situation, the cross comes to represent true faith. These two encounters show that Peter’s initial reaction progressed to true faith. Peter, Jesus’ own disciple couldn’t stomach the thought of Jesus dying in this way, but this was a natural reaction to the thought of Jesus being crucified. It was Jesus who recognized Satan was encouraging this negativity and realized that temptation had come through those closest to Him. And isn’t it true even today, that family and peer pressure will often hinder people’s acceptance of the gospel. We can also identify with the backtracking when being a Christian lands us in difficult and/or dangerous situations. The text in John 6 records that in the days just before the crucifixion, many who had believed up to this point, turned back, prompting Jesus query about the Twelve leaving Him too. So, even while Jesus lived, the cross became the emblem by which the faith and commitment of those who were closest to Him would be judged and recognized. That representation of the cross is still the standard today. Our answer still needs to be that of Peter. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” Like Peter, we will fail our Lord at times, but in the times after the cross, like Peter, we would recognize the cross as representing forgiveness.

But the prospect of the cross was also a test of Jesus faith and commitment to His Father’s will. In Jesus’ determination to go to Jerusalem to face this fate we see a willingness to carry out what was planned from the foundation of the world. Jesus’ willingness to go down that road was proof positive that what He faced was in the mind and will of God, and everything from before the beginning of time was leading up to this event which would become the centre-piece of human history and the beginning of the end of Satan’s power.

So, before the cross, what it would come to represent was already made clear. Firstly, the victory over Satan was entering its final phase. Sometimes it is worth reading the last chapters of a book to see what happens to the villain. In Satan’s case, the war was already won, even though some battles still had to be fought. Secondly, Jesus’ teaching in different ways revealed that all the blessings of salvation had now been made to whosoever would believe and accept God’s means to achieve it. Last, but not least, the cross was the emblem of faithfulness and goodness of God in being prepared to allow His only Son to die such a terrible death to demonstrate His love for His human creation. Nothing else could have made this more obvious than Jesus perfect life and willing obedience to the Father’s will to die in our place. All of this Paul summed up in Colossians 2:13-15

Colossians 2:13-15 (NIV) When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

WEEK 4: AT THE CROSS

When we come to the time of the actual crucifixion, we are faced with a theological dilemma. It is a dilemma we seldom think about; or if we do, we prefer not to dwell on it too much. If the cross was in the mind of God from before the world began, why should human beings be held responsible for Jesus death? Can the people whose actions led to the crucifixion be held responsible if, at the same

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time, Jesus died according to the will of God? You can see our dilemma here. If we say God's will alone determined the cross, one disturbing thought is that God predestined these people to do what they did and therefore put them beyond redemption? If, on the other hand, we claim human beings alone were responsible, then we are implying God has no control over human actions, or He is prepared to let their own political and religious allegiances govern their actions. How do we resolve the dilemma arising from God's will and human responsibility? The cross brings this problem into sharp focus and because it is one of the most perplexing and controversial aspects of the cross, we need to approach it with a great deal of caution and pray for the Holy Spirit to give us a proper understanding of it.

I have no definitive solution to that dilemma, but what I read in the Bible helps me to come to the conclusion that human beings do bear responsibility for His death. As we have already seen, this world is a battleground for the souls of every individual. God's purpose is to save humanity; Satan's purpose is to destroy it. Both have their methods of achieving their aims. But ultimately it is human beings themselves who make choices about what methods they adopt to live their lives. And I mention yet again that is because God has given every human being the same gift that He gave Lucifer – the gift of free will. God knew the risks, but as I've said before, God will not force His will on anyone.

Because God will not force His will upon us, we bear responsibility for how we use our wills. None of us would deny life presents us with many kinds of choices – what subjects we will study at school, what job we want to get, where we will live, what we will do in our leisure time, who we will marry, what we will spend money on etc. Medics will point to survival being linked to how strong a person's will to live is. Tragically, the opposite is true when a person loses the will to live. We write wills and we plan what we will do when we retire or win the lottery, whichever comes first. Why then should we be exempt from using that same will when it comes to whether or not to accept or reject the claims of God upon our lives? The fact is that everyone involved in the actual crucifixion of Christ was faced with a choice. God knew what choices would be made and, in His permissive will, He used those choices to achieve His purpose and thwart that of Satan

What happened at the cross is well known to you. The arrest, the trials, the nailing of Jesus to the cross, the soldier's gambling for His clothes; the acceptance of Jesus' sovereignty by one thief and rejection by the other; the darkness; the renting of the temple veil; the words of Jesus; the commending of His mother to John's care; His cry of dereliction; His death and the piercing of His side by a soldier; and the confession of the centurion "Surely this man was the Son of God. You will also know that two of the gospels do not mention Jesus' birth but all 4 gospels give a great deal of attention to His death. I apologise in advance for the amount of text on the slides even though it reflects only a fraction of the detail given about Jesus' death by the NT writers. What those records clearly show is not only the actions of those involved, but also the motivation behind those actions.

Before we make any judgements about these, however, it is important to see that any conclusion drawn is in accordance to what is already present in Scripture.

Acts 2:36-37 (NIV) Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Acts 4:5-7 & 10 (NIV) The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

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Then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

1 Corinthians 2:7-9 (NIV) No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Look at the accusations in these texts. On the day of Pentecost Peter laid the blame for the death of Christ on his fellow Jews. When the lame man was healed by Peter and John, Peter again, and more specifically this time, blamed the religious hierarchy and Jews in general for the death of Christ. This gave rise to the widely held belief that the Jews were Christ-killers. Paul, too, sees the rulers of this world as responsible. Such rulers could include the Jewish religious authorities and Herod. But the actual rulers of the world at that time were the Romans and in particular, Pontius Pilate who had given in to Jewish demands to crucify Jesus. And, into this pot we have to include Judas Iscariot. If he had not betrayed Jesus to the authorities, would Jesus have died? Taking these texts alone we are faced with the question raised by these observations – Who was responsible for Jesus' death? Who killed Jesus? Because Jesus did not just die. Jesus was put to death. Nothing less than judicial murder was involved.

To resolve some of the difficult issues about human responsibility I go back to events in heaven before the world began and the Garden of Eden when Lucifer, Adam and Eve were given free will. From that time onwards, the most important and most fundamental use of that free will would be to choose to follow God or Satan. We saw from looking at the fullness of time that men chose the darkness of Satan rather than the light of God. During Jesus' three year ministry Jesus manifested the light of God, but He Himself declared that people had chosen to love darkness instead of light. When Jesus states that people make a choice, He was clearly stating, human beings are responsible for how they employ their free will.

John 3:19-20 (NIV) This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

The cross therefore, comes to represent, the worst possible use of human free will. Starting with Judas we see the choice was made of his own volition to approach the Jewish authorities and seek a reward to betray Jesus.

Luke 22:3-6 (NIV) Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

John 12:5-6 (NIV) Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Ephesians 4:27-28 (NIV) and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

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For three years Judas had been Jesus' companion. For three years Judas had the privilege of seeing God at work. For three years, he had witnessed the blessings of the incoming kingdom of God. For three years he had been part of a divine ministry that was good and right in every way. Why did he turn against Jesus? The verse in Luke 22 clearly gives Satan a role in Judas' betrayal. Given it was Satan's chief ambition to ruin everything God was planning, it was inevitable that he would seek a human instrument. Why Judas? Because Judas had already given him a foothold. We read in John 12 that Judas was a thief. His vice was the love of money. We may speculate about Judas' motives. We may ask if Jesus knew about this vice, why was Judas' in charge of the money bag? We could answer that by saying it was a test of Judas' loyalty. Would he choose money or Jesus? Satan could only use his avarice if Judas let him. Judas nurtured his vice by stealing from Jesus and the apostles. Had he refrained, Satan would never have been able to use him. Judas was personally responsible for his faults. And at the Last Supper we see him turning down his last chance to change his mind.

John 13:26-27 (NIV) Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly."

Mark 14:44-45 (NIV) Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." 45 Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him.

In Jewish hospitality it was an honour to be offered a part of the meal from the hands of the host. Jesus by offering Judas the bread was, in effect, saying to him, 'it's not too late; you don't have to go through with this – you can be forgiven.' Judas, then and there, had a choice – and he made the wrong one. Mark goes on to show how deliberate Judas' betrayal was because he had even arranged the signal which would single Jesus out from among the others with Him. And the signal he chose was the height of deceit. The symbol of friendship in an act of betrayal. While Judas had no part in the actual killing of Jesus, it was he who had made it possible by the ways he exercised his free will.

We can then turn to the Jewish authorities who were the political as well as the religious rulers in Judea, for even the Romans recognised that the Jewish nation was a theocracy. But Jesus' ministry brought to the surface the worst traits of their human natures and resulted in their determination to act on those traits.

Mark 3:5-6 (NIV) He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Mark 11:17-19 (NIV) And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

Jesus had really annoyed the Jewish political and religious authorities by His criticisms of them, by the parable of the tenants who killed the heir for they knew it was spoken against them (Luke 20:19). Here we see people watching to see if He would break the law by healing on the Sabbath day. But it was especially His cleansing of the temple, which robbed them of the profits from the

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corruption and greed of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals that confirmed their desire to kill Him. Jesus had previously criticised the Pharisees for their love of money and the Sanhedrin were motivated by the same avarice. The fact that it called it ‘a den of thieves’ indicates the extent to which the religious authorities condoned the corrupt commercial practices. Their subsequent actions resulted from what was innate in all human nature – anger at the loss of economic profit, murderous hatred (Luke 19:47); offended pride because Jesus was popular with the people who regarded His teaching as more authoritative than theirs. Again it is Jesus Himself who points to their culpability

Matthew 27:18 (NIV) Pilate knew they had handed Jesus over “out of envy”

Mark 15:11 (NIV) But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

John 19:11 (NIV) Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

The Jewish authorities had the power to prevent Jesus’ death. They chose not to. They willed His death and deliberately chose the ways to ensure this happened. We just have to see how many of the things Jesus listed in His teaching that were manifested in both Judas and the religious authorities.

Mark 7:20-23 (NIV) He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

And what about Pilate? Historical records show Pilate was procurator of Judea for 10 years between AD26 and AD36.

John 19:12 (NIV) From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.”

1 Kings 18:21 (NIV) Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.

Matthew 16:24-26 (NIV) Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

He was an able administrator, but could be ruthless because he was required to keep law and order, regardless of what actions had to be taken to ensure that. But he was contemptuous of the Jews and some of his actions, including taking some of the Temple money to build an aqueduct, angered the Jews. They did not hide the fact and they hated him for it. Hence when the opportunity came to blackmail him into sentencing Jesus to death they took it. But Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him. Why did Pilate not do what he knew to be right? He did try. He sent Jesus to Herod hoping Herod would decide His fate, knowing that Herod could not sentence Him to death. He agreed to punish Jesus rather than crucify Him. He said he would release him,

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allowing the crowd to take the decision for him. Then he washed his hands of the whole affair, claiming the outcome was none of his doing. Pilate refused to make a choice, even knowing what the right choice was. Pilate was a prime example of wavering between two opinions and at the end of the day, self-preservation won.

Finally, the soldiers who carried out the gruesome task of nailing Jesus to the cross.

Mark 15:17-20 (NIV) They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. 18 And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" 19 Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. 20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

Luke 23:36-37 (NIV) The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

Matthew 27:54 (NIV) When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

From their torture of Him the preceding night to their mockery as He hung on the cross, they exhibited a brutality, a lack of compassion and a total disregard for human life. However, this portrayal of the soldiers is mitigated somewhat by the fact that there did come a realization that they had been wrong in their estimation of who Jesus was. While this does not excuse their previous callousness, it at least shows that even when human nature has done its worst, there is the possibility to change it.

The cross thus represents the vices of certain groups and individuals using their wills collectively and individually to cause the death of Christ. For three years of Jesus' public ministry, every person had the choice to believe He was who and what He claimed to be or reject those claims. Every person involved had the choice of perceiving them as an opportunity for salvation or as a threat to their own positions, traditions or their chosen lifestyles. And if that sounds familiar, it's because that is still what the cross represents today.

Romans 1:29 (NIV) They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.....

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV) Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

1 Peter 1:25 - 2:1 (NIV) And this is the word that was preached to you. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

Whether we like it or not, the ultimate responsibility for Jesus' death is sinful human nature. While we can point the finger at those who actually killed Jesus, all the vices that nailed Jesus to the cross are rampant in our world today. We are all responsible for His death. Someone said we should remember that when we point a finger at others, three fingers are pointing back to ourselves. Even as Christians, none of us are immune to falling into any of these sins. The words of Paul and Peter are clear. We have to rid ourselves of these things. The choice is ours. Our will must be directed to re-examine our lives in the light of what put Jesus on the cross and then what it represents in terms of the Person of Christ and His sacrifice. We have no excuse because the Holy Spirit is there to help

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us change our natures. But, the Holy Spirit cannot work with an unwilling subject. Jesus recognized this too.

Luke 13:34-35 (NIV) Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Yet, if the cross represents the worst humanity can do to God, it also represents the very best God can do for humanity. It is only in the time after the cross, which will come next week, that we can see the full extent of that. For now, at the cross we can agree with Oswald Chambers, who regarded the emblem of suffering and shame as:

“...a superb triumph by which the foundations of hell were put in a permanent state of shock which will result in their ultimate collapse.”

WEEK 5: AFTER THE CROSS

Over the past 4 weeks we've explored why, when and how the cross came to be the emblem of Christianity. From the time the New Testament was written to the present day, the importance of the cross for Christianity is undisputed. Theologians, regardless of many other differences of opinion, agree that the emblem of the cross stands at the centre of the theology of salvation. The topic of salvation, in other words is meaningless without the reference to the cross. Although I have only been able to offer you 'highlight's' of when the cross came to prominence as the emblem of our faith, why it was a necessary goal of God's planning and how it happened on that Easter weekend 2000 years ago, it is worthwhile reviewing how they fit in with our 21st century understanding of what the cross represents. We have to start with the source of our information. Today we are so fortunate because we have the writings of the New Testament and the record of the discussions and deliberations of theologians from the early Church Fathers to the present day about what the cross represents.

In many ways, however, the abundance of this knowledge has desensitized us to the harsh reality of crucifixion. Our sanitized images of crosses in our churches and as items of jewelry, also do not convey its ugliness and brutality.

1 Corinthians 1:22-24 (NIV) Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

That is why, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, that it was a stumbling block for Jews who regarded anyone dying on a cross as cursed by God. For them, the cross was literally an emblem of suffering and shame. It was foolishness to the Greeks who regarded dying on a cross to save humanity a clear indication of stupidity and even madness. Both perceptions came from the fact that first century Christians understood what the cross represented in a way we never can, because such executions were a part of their life experience. It is only when considering this fact that we realize what an uphill task the apostles and Paul faced when they preached and taught that the cross represented much more than a gruesome and torturous instrument of criminal execution. People would have needed a lot of convincing that a crucified Man was a Messiah and Saviour, as Paul's comment about the attitudes of Jews and Greeks shows. In spite of that difficulty, however, Paul continued to make even more explicit his belief and faith in all the emblem of the cross stood for.

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Acts 2:36 (NIV) Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

Acts 4:10 (NIV) then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.

Hebrews 12:1-3 (NIV) And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

1 Peter 2:24 (NIV) He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

Apart from the gospels and Paul’s writings, there are only 4 direct references to the cross and Jesus being crucified in the rest of the New Testament. In Acts, Peter asserts Lordship and Messiahship to the crucifixion of Jesus and the power of the resurrected Christ is what has healed the lame man. In his letter, he attributes the healing from the taint of sin and the ability to die to sin and live for righteousness to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. The writer to the Hebrews similarly uses the example of the crucifixion of Jesus as the exhortation and encouragement to a community undergoing persecution to persevere in their faith. Jesus is presented the one who never wearied in His mission and never gave up or lost heart, even knowing He was facing the most extreme and fatal form of opposition. And although, outside the Pauline corpus these are the only 4 explicit mentions of the cross, the combination of all the implicit references to crucifixion and the death of Christ, both in the Pauline writings and the other letters, constitutes the foundational message of the early church. As I mentioned the first week, it took 2-3 centuries for the cross to become the universal emblem of Christianity, but it was the preaching and the teaching about the cross in the New Testament, spread with the dynamic guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, that brought this about. It was inevitable that Paul would come to the forefront in this outreach. His Spirit inspired insight gave him a unique understanding of the whole spectrum of what the cross represented. It was an understanding that infused and directed his whole being. And, for Paul, the cross became the central motif of the whole Christ event and his life’s mission was to proclaim it to the world.

In the New Testament the cross stands for the greatest and the last revelation God will give to the world and it centres on the cross. Because it was only made possible by the cross, that is why Samuel M Zwemer (1867-1952) asserted that *“If the cross of Christ is anything to the mind, it is surely everything – the most profound reality and the sublimest mystery.”*

Paul saw that profound reality and sublime mystery in terms of the revelation of the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV) For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Colossians 1:21-22 (NIV) Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.

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Paul saw that profound reality and sublime mystery in terms of the power of God. It is true that since we cannot know the mind of God in its entirety, there will inevitably be questions about why God decided a cross would represent His power. Or why an emblem of pain, distress and shame would represent everything God did and still is doing to save a rebellious humanity from the consequences of its own choices. Or why an instrument of torture would come to represent the greatest demonstration of divine love the world will ever know? The fact and the truth of the matter is that God did not make a mistake, for the cross, as we have seen has become the world-wide emblem of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot deny that God's greatest revelation of His very power, nature and character was when He sent Jesus into the world. When we look at Jesus and His willingness to atone for the sins of the world on a cross, we see what lengths God was prepared to go to save us. The verses from Colossians spell out for us the cross standing for reconciliation to God on the basis of the atoning sacrifice of Christ which clothed us with His righteousness.

Secondly it was the revelation of the greatest love the world will ever know.

John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

2 Corinthians 5:18 - 6:1 (NIV) All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

These two texts alone sum up the fact that God is a God of love. God is a God who wants to share that love with His human creation. God is a God who is prepared to sacrifice Himself in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, to make a relationship based on love possible for a sinful humanity. Note how Paul implores, pleads with his audience to come to this believing faith in Christ and be reconciled to the God who could not have done anything more to show His love for those who were His enemies. I doubt if anyone would contradict the assertion that no other image in this world could represent this revelation of God the way the cross does.

Next, after the cross we can see it representing the conquest of evil. The cross is the ultimate symbol of the decisive battle against Satan which we saw started before the world was even created.

“Death of death and hell's destruction”

2 Timothy 1:10-11 (NIV) but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

Colossians 2:15 (NIV) And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 (NIV) When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your

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sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Satan, throughout history and until God puts a stop to his activity, has used every means at his disposal to pervert, corrupt and destroy God’s creation. His activity introduced physical death into the world, but his most potent weapon of mass destruction was eternal spiritual death. This weapon was neutralized on the cross. Satan’s last hope of victory was employed at the cross. He intended the suffering and shame of the cross to destroy Jesus because he knew God’s victory depended on Jesus fulfilling His role as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. What he did not reckon on was God’s plans for the time after the cross. Death destroyed, evil powers and authorities disarmed and shamed by the triumph of the cross – the ultimate victory over spiritual death, Satan’s most potent weapon of mass destruction. As a result of the resurrection, Satan’s last weapon no longer has the power it had because belief in Jesus and all His death on a cross represents has provided a means to escape his clutches and ultimate victory is guaranteed.

Satan also did not reckon that the conquest of evil also involved turning an instrument of suffering and shame into an emblem pointing to glory.

John 17:3-5 (NIV) Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.

Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Revelation 17:14 (NIV) They (Satan’s followers) will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus spoke of His work as bringing glory to God. He did not see Himself as a victim but as a victor. Jesus knew He was returning to the Father, to the glory He had had before His incarnation. The familiar words in Philippians assert the glory of the exalted Christ. I suppose it’s really not very Christian to gloat. But, admit it, wouldn’t you really like to witness Satan’s reaction when he sees every knee bowing and every tongue confessing Christ as Lord to the glory of the God he set out oppose with every tactic and weapon at his command? Wouldn’t you like to witness the scene when Satan finally has to recognize his final defeat when Jesus is recognized as the victorious Lord of lords and King of kings at the end of time? However, whether we witness it or not, this is what the defeat of evil will appear as at the end of time.

Romans 3:10-12 (NIV) As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Romans 3:23-25 (NIV) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.

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Ephesians 2:4-5 (NIV) But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

That is because the aftermath of the cross ensured the means of the salvation of sinners had been accomplished. Human beings who accept the atonement offered by Christ's sacrificial death are rescued from the realm and domain of Satan and move to the light of the kingdom of God. The most obvious way we remember that today is in the sacrament of communion. Two aspects of the cross come to the fore. First, the cross points to our standing before God. The other aspect is explained by the word 'sacrament' which the dictionary defines as: "a ceremony regarded as imparting spiritual grace"

Since this act of remembrance focuses our attention on Jesus' death on the cross, the sacrament takes us beyond just a routine act of obedience to Jesus' command. It is a reminder of what we should always be remembering because the cross revealed God's grace – His unmerited favour towards sinful humanity. The cross stands for the grace that revealed the extent of His love for those who had offended and rebelled against Him. The cross reveals what it cost God to justify us – a legal declaration of our right standing with Him – and all that follows from that. That is why the emblem of suffering and shame becomes "the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died."

And communion leads us to remembering, this ceremony is only relevant to a particular people and a particular community – the sinners saved by grace who now make up the church or kingdom of God. It may have taken 2 or 3 centuries to get there, but the cross is the emblem of the church.

*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord
She is His new creation by water and the word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.*

Colossians 1:18 (NIV) And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

1 Timothy 3:14-15 (NIV) Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

The very existence of the church depends entirely on the message of the cross. Had Satan's schemes succeeded, we would not be sitting here 2000 years later talking about the cross. Had he succeeded, the cross would never have become an emblem of the community God had planned and purposed before the foundation of the world, which we now call the church. The very existence of the church is the tangible manifestation of the power of God to do what He purposed to do. It confirms the plans and purposes of the eternal God cannot be thwarted. And Paul's word assures us that true believers make up the church of the living God who Himself is the pillar and foundation of all truth.

The existence of such a church is proof that a relationship with God has been made possible for believers who accept the atonement of Jesus' sacrifice of Himself on a cross. Nothing could spell out the closeness of the relationship God designed for us, than adoption as the children of God and co-heirs with His Son, not just for now, but for all eternity. That is why, we as a church, must continue the work the apostles and Paul began. After the cross all their efforts were directed into preaching and teaching the message, in spite of the opposition and danger they faced. That is why

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Paul can defiantly declare – We preach Christ crucified – in the face of the opposition of Jew and Gentile thinking.

And finally, in this time after the cross it is the emblem of our responsibility.

2 Timothy 1:11-14 (NIV) And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day. What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

2 Timothy 1:9-10 (NIV) He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

1 Peter 2:24 (NIV) “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

1 John 2:3-7 (NIV) We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

Although these texts in Timothy are from Paul, there is no doubt that it would be the same advice which the other apostles would give and would testify to. Like Paul, the others would have been utterly convinced of the gospel's truth. Like Paul, they would have urged their audiences to hold on to the truths they had been given and to continue to preach and teach it whenever and wherever they could. That is the mission of the church today as the community of believers. And Greenfield Baptist Church in Llanelli has been playing its part in carrying on that mission for the last 160 years. Every true church must maintain its stance as the pillar and foundation of truth and in particular, the truth of the cross.

But we also remember that Paul was speaking to Timothy as an individual, for the church collectively will only be a witness to the world if its members adhere to what the example of the cross demands of their lifestyles. If our testimony is that we know in whom we have believed and are convinced that our lives are now guarded by Christ against a day when God will judge the world, then we need to practice what we preach. That is why, as individuals, we have to see the cross as standing for a Christians lifestyle. The cross is the emblem of self-denial and submission to God's will, even though for Jesus, this meant death on a cross. We have seen that in the time after the cross, it became a beacon for the way Paul lived his life after his Damascus Road experience. Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude are in complete agreement that being crucified with Christ means we live according to His commands and rejection of any of our own ways that do not accord with what Jesus taught.

In this time after the cross, therefore, we collectively as a church and as individuals, have an enormous responsibility. From what has been covered over these weeks, we have the knowledge and understanding of all the cross represents for all that God has purposed and planned for humanity. No other earthly emblem could even convey what Samuel M Zwemer (1867-1952)

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described as all the wealth and glory of the gospel. As this text from Revelation implies, its wealth and glory is celebrated in heaven itself. When all other emblems of earthly functions, processes or organisations have passed into oblivion, the cross will be remembered because of the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world. It will be the focus of praise and worship in heaven and for eternity. And, knowing that, helps us to see that the cross stands for the hope of every Christian to be among that number and joining in that praise and worship, because the emblem of suffering and shame, for all eternity, will be hailed as the ‘wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died.’

“One comes to realize that literally all the wealth and glory of the gospel centres here.”

Revelation 5:11-14 (NIV) Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”