

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #8

What Jesus did at the Cross

Colossians 1:13-23 New International Version (NIV)

¹³For he (God) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption (5), the forgiveness of sins (A). ¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (2). ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead (2), so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (B).

²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of ^{21a}your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you (B) by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation (4)—²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel (1). This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness (C). He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands (2). Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God (4), who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you ^{13a}alive with Christ (C). He forgave us all our sins (A), ¹⁴having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away (4), nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.(3)

To last week's essential statement that "God became human in Jesus Christ" Paul here adds another essential statement repeated in different ways throughout the New Testament: "Jesus Christ died to save people."

As we have seen, the contemporary tendency is to emphasize Jesus's humanity and to deny his divinity. The resulting view of Jesus's death is that it represented the tragic failure of his mission. Presumably Jesus set out to proclaim God's Kingdom of Love and to teach humans tolerance and peace, and was crucified for his efforts—a noble failure, but a failure nonetheless.

Before I deal directly with this point of view, allow me to state what is not in dispute: Jesus was indeed crucified, a brutal form of execution that Romans employed to punish those non-Romans who dared rebel against the empire. That Jesus was executed in this way is the Bible's single most certain fact, attested to by Christians, Jews, and Roman historians. It was, moreover, a fact that Christians put at the center of their faith despite the real embarrassment it represented.

The earliest known representation of the crucifixion which archaeologists have discovered is graffiti on a wall in the ruins of ancient Rome and dates from about the year 150C.E. This is it:

The inscription mocks the figure on the left which represents a certain Christian by saying: "Alexamenos worships his God." His God is a crucified figure with the head of a donkey (anyone dumb enough to get himself crucified has to be a donkey). If our contemporaries tend to view Jesus's crucifixion as tragedy, this depiction shows that for ancients it was simply ludicrous.

But if Jesus is indeed both human and divine, as the Christian faith holds, then the Cross must be something different than nonsensical tragedy. When Christians say that "Jesus died for sinners," they mean that the Cross was the place where Jesus achieved peace between God and selfish human beings, who by being selfish were also God's enemies.

The great English word for this peace is "atonement", which means what its parts suggest: at-one-ment, a kind of "super-reconciliation" that brings lifelong enemies into harmonious loving unity. Through faith in

Jesus Christ and by virtue of his death we have been (I have underlined and labelled each point in the passage above):

- A. Forgiven of our evil deeds and attitudes,
- B. Reconciled to God and to creation
- C. Given new life, eternal in duration and abundant in quality.

How is it that this happened? What was it about Jesus's death that enabled this forgiveness and salvation to occur? The church has traditionally explained this mystery in five different and frequently competing ways. I present four of these briefly in order of least to most controversial and the fifth and most controversial I will present at a little more length. Although Christians have fought passionately over the different "theories of the atonement", I believe that all five explanations are valid. (again, the numbers appear in the passage above)

1. Jesus became our *Example* to follow. When Jesus died on the cross, he showed humanity as it had never seen before, what sacrificial love truly is. This example of love is so great, so symbolically powerful, that it enables us to love each other. Jesus has become the model of how to please God, and even though all our other role models may disappoint us, Jesus will always remain our perfect role model. This is what Paul means when in verse 1:23 he calls us to "continue in the faith", unmoved "in the hope of the gospel."
2. At the Cross Jesus became a *Trailblazer*. In rural Mexico, one builds a "road" by running a heavy truck through to create ruts for cars, bicycles, and carts to follow. Jesus opened a road where none existed before. To change metaphors, since Jesus's life was anchored in both realities, he built a bridge between humans and God. He says in John, "I am the way." Again changing metaphors, we are "circumcised in Christ," in 2:11. Every Jewish boy at the age of 8 days had the end of his male organ (the part of the body we most commonly associate with sin) cut off by a priest or rabbi. Paul says that through his painful death on the cross, Jesus has cut off the necessary connection between our spirits and sin, giving us freedom to approach God.
3. At the Cross Jesus became *Conqueror* over death and the devil. In 2:15 Paul says that Jesus "disarmed the principalities and powers"—every evil influence, enslaving habit, and oppressive force—"and made a public example of them triumphing over them in the Cross. In an interesting paradox, the Cross, which was a symbol of utter defeat became the definitive sign of the triumph of God's love to be proudly displayed in countless churches and around countless necks. As a symbol the Cross even conquered the very Roman empire that had used it to kill Jesus. Almost 300 years after Jesus's death a Roman general who aspired to be emperor had a vision of a cross with shining letters underneath that read, "In this sign you will conquer." Constantine barely knew who Jesus was, and never came to know truly what Jesus represented, but because he considered that the cross which he associated with Jesus had helped him gain the throne of the empire, Constantine set Christianity on the path to become the official religion of that empire.
4. At the Cross Jesus became our *Substitute* for the punishment we deserved. The law demanded that we be punished (2:14), just as surely as our older siblings demanded of our parents that they punish us when we did something for which our elders had also been punished. The Scriptures suggest that Satan plays this role of the accuser, demanding that just as he was thrown out of Heaven for his selfish disobedience, so we be cut off from God for ours. Couldn't God have rewritten the law to let us off? Why did Jesus have to be *wounded for our transgressions* and *crushed for our iniquities*? Have you noticed what happens when a child consistently gets "let off" in the face of bad behavior? When Jesus offered to take our punishment upon himself, it wasn't because God the Father angrily demanded blood in vengeance, but because God lovingly chose to take us seriously, and to join us to Jesus through burial (baptism) and resurrection. He had to take us seriously if he was to adopt us as children, and that meant necessarily taking our sin seriously as well. Love demanded no less.

5. Jesus's crucifixion was the *price* he paid for us. The word "redemption" is a financial term. It means paying to get something or someone out of hock. The controversial question arising from this view is: Who did Jesus pay? Did he pay God—why would God keep us in hock? Did he pay the Devil—just how did the Devil come to have ownership of us, and why would Jesus have any business with the Devil anyway? The Bible clearly tells Christians, however, *you are not your own, you were bought at a price* (1 Corinthians 6:20).

I think the key to beginning to understand this is in an experience that King David had toward the end of his life in the Old Testament. He had made a mistake in his relationship with God, and the Angel of Death had been sent to punish his people (why this was is not entirely explained). But as the Angel of Death approached Jerusalem, God had pity on the people and on David and stopped the angel in his tracks at a place on the hill right outside (at that time) Jerusalem that was owned by a certain Araunah. David went to this place and asked Araunah to sell him the place so he, David, could perform a sacrifice there. Araunah, who wasn't even Jewish, was frightened of David and insisted on giving him the place, but David responded, "I can't offer the Lord my God a sacrifice that cost me nothing."

Could God have found another way to redeem us at a cheaper price? In the Garden of Gethsemani, Jesus seems to have thought so. But God, whose fullness dwelt bodily in Jesus, chose not to get us cheap. He chose to purchase us as expensively as he could.

You will have heard the story of the Pacific Islander who was a trader and who never passed up the chance to drive a hard bargain. In that culture, one procured a wife by paying her father in cows, usually one (if the girl was ugly), two (if she was decent), or three (if she was very beautiful). The trader began courting the daughter of a certain man, and the people said to each other: "He is courting that woman because he knows he can get her cheap. We know he wouldn't court an expensive woman." To their great surprise on the wedding day they found out that the groom had paid *seven* cows for his wife. When asked about the unheard-of way he had been taken advantage of the trader answered, "all my life I have wanted to marry a seven-cow wife, and the wife I have is worth seven cows." And that woman became the most beautiful, radiant, and confident woman on the island.

It's like this: Jesus and Satan both wanted to buy your soul. You let Satan put in the first bid. Satan said, "What would you like? I'll give you anything, but I warn you that I drive a hard bargain." Satan convinced each and every one of us to sell our souls to him for the status, money, pleasures, and toys that we wanted, but which were so very cheap compared to our souls. Once those things were spent we were trapped in hock. It was then that Jesus put in his bid. He set your value as high as he possibly could, by paying for you in his own blood. And he didn't pay the devil, He offered to pay *you*. He offered you *yourself* with a new freedom to submit to God out of love and gratitude rather than guilt or obligation. Because this offer had to be made person, by person, Jesus did indeed die for *you* and was willing to die for you *alone*.

The Christian life is simply the care and use of something that has been bought at an incalculable cost and given to you to care for, and that something is YOURSELF.