

**Cross**  
**Purposes**

**Victor Folkert**

## Cross Purposes: A Conversation for Lent

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*Deeper Conversations Study Guides* make profound biblical truths accessible and relevant for small groups.

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## Cross Purposes

*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 . . . We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God*

*Romans 1:18-24*

Crosses are everywhere: hanging from gold chains around the necks of celebrities, tattooed on the arms of athletes, erected along roadsides to memorialize tragic accidents, and adorning church buildings. For some people, a cross is merely a good luck charm or a fashion statement, while others wear a cross as a testimony to their faith

Most people know that the cross is a Christian symbol, but many are puzzled by the reality it signifies. Some are repulsed by the gory spectacle of death by crucifixion, while others are offended by the necessity of Jesus dying for the sins of the world, particularly their sins. Others ignore the cross as irrelevant to their personal lives or the problems of today's world.

Christians look to the cross for salvation, saying things like, "Jesus died in my place," or "Christ died for the sins of the world." Those are wonderful truths, but they only begin to express the profound impact of the cross, which Paul describes as "the power and wisdom of God."

New Testament writers used a variety of words and images to portray the purpose of the cross and resurrection, evoking concepts of sacrifice, atonement, suffering, example, love, reconciliation, ransom, substitution, justification, obedience, and victory over evil and death. Later theologians added additional perspectives, using analogies and motifs suitable to their own cultural settings. From them, we inherit theories such as penal satisfaction, moral influence, and liberation from unjust suffering.

## Cross Purposes

The meaning of the cross is too important to be left to the theologians.<sup>1</sup> As we view the cross through lenses of our own experience, we gain practical insights into the meaning of the cross for ourselves and the people around us.

### **Guiding Deeper Conversations**

The unique format of this study guide allows everyone in the group to read and join in the conversation. Those who read in advance will be able to engage more personally and respond to their reading in personal reflection and prayer. Those who do not read in advance can open the book on the same page as everyone in the group.

The group should not try to read every word and answer every question. Before each meeting, the leader should read the study guide, marking key paragraphs and thought-provoking questions. The group can then focus their conversation on what is most relevant for them.

Some questions refer to preceding paragraphs. Reading a couple of paragraphs with the group will allow everyone in the group to join in the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, 12.

# 1

## Love

As our Sunday morning life group departed for dinner, Maritza stopped to tell me a fascinating story. Her immigrant neighbor practices an Eastern religion with many gods, each offering specific benefits. Maritza was deeply troubled by this, and one day she blurted out, “Which of your gods would come to die for you? What kind of god does that? Only Jesus does that!”

When Maritza’s neighbor told her that a Roman Catholic friend in Spain had sent a gift of a new image to add to her pantheon of gods, she broke down in tears. Later, the neighbor went to see the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Afterwards, she admitted that Christ, whom she had relegated to a low position on her list of gods, was now near the top of the list.

1. *What does the cross mean for Maritza and her neighbor? How did Maritza’s actions reinforce the impact of the cross?*
2. *What would you say to someone who believes all religions are basically the same? How does the cross distinguish Christianity from other religions?*

### *The Cross Demonstrates God's Love*

Many religious or spiritual people agree with 1 John 4:16, "God is love." Yet some vaguely conceive of God's love as a warm feeling, an affirming presence, or a mystical life-source.

God's love is demonstrated in commitment and action. In the Old Testament, he committed himself to a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He delivered his covenant people from captivity in Egypt and brought them into the promised land. He invited them into a relationship with himself, through the law, worship, and blessing.

Despite God's gracious actions, the people of Israel rejected his love and guidance, and he sent them into captivity. Yet he did not abandon them, and he graciously allowed them to go back to their homeland.

Still, they doubted his love. The prophet Malachi, writing four hundred years before Jesus, expressed God's frustration: "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'" God's chosen people had forgotten what God did for their ancestors, and they were focused only on whether God was "blessing them" as they thought he should.

This strikes close to home, because many Christians, when asked how they know God loves them, say something like, "I have been blessed." God's blessings are an expression of his love, but our trust in God's love should not depend on our assessment of what he has done for us lately. He proved his love, once and for all, by sending his own Son to die for us.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have  
eternal life.

—John 3:16



## Love

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

—Romans 5:8

The enduring reality of the cross gives us unshakable confidence in God's love.

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . [Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:32, 39

3. *How did God demonstrate his love in the Old Testament?*
4. *What circumstances might cause someone to doubt God's love? What are some ways to change the focus from personal circumstances to the enduring reality of God's love?*
5. *How would you reply if someone asked how you know God loves you? Is the cross at the center of your soul as you contemplate God's love?*

### ***The Cross Embodies God's Love***

A mother plays a game with her two-year-old child, asking, "How much do I love you?" She splits her thumb and forefinger, saying, "This much?" She holds out her hands, saying, "This much?" Then she spreads her arms wide, to exclaim, "This much!"

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When Jesus spread his arms on the cross, it was not only to proclaim his love, but to validate it. As he said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Love for his disciples sustained Jesus in his final days. John 13:1 tells us, “Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end.” The end, of course, was the cross, where Jesus said, “It is finished.”

Yet Jesus was not thinking only of the twelve disciples when he willingly gave his life. In John 12:32, he said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.”

The crucifixion is ancient history for us, but the love that sent Jesus to the cross is not diminished by time. In the all-encompassing scope of God’s redemptive plan, Jesus died for people at all times and places. The reality of the cross spans history.

Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, archbishop of Paris from 1981 until his retirement in 2005, told this story: In 1939, a group of boys dared each other to enter a Roman Catholic church and confess to the priest a made-up list of terrible sins. One of them, a Jewish boy named Aaron, took up the challenge.

Aaron marched into the confessional, and the priest immediately recognized what he was up to. Without showing any sign of annoyance, he gave the boy a simple penance: Go up before the altar, kneel before the image of Jesus on the cross, and say three times, “Jesus, I know you died for me, but I don’t give a damn.”

“Hah! Easier than I thought,” Aaron told himself. He went up the altar to do his penance, and he shouted, “Jesus, I know you died for me, but I don’t give a damn.” He repeated, “Jesus, I know you died for me, but I don’t give a damn.” A third time, he began, “Jesus, I know you died for me, but I don’t give . . .” He could not go on.

## Love

The following year, in August of 1940, Aaron was baptized and he took the name, "Jean-Marie." Cardinal Lustiger wrapped up the story by saying, "That boy is standing here now, speaking to you."

6. *What did your parents do that proved the extent of their love?*
7. *How is the reality of Christ's death on the cross different from other stories of sacrificing one's life for a friend?*
8. *Why do some people have a hard time accepting the cross as evidence of God's love for them?*

### ***The Cross Initiates Us into God's Life of Love***

If we truly understand Christ's love for us, it will inspire us to love others. We might even feel an obligation to share God's love, because our Lord and Savior died for us.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

—1 John 3:16

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

—2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Christ's love is a powerful motivation, but our love is often imperfect. Unlike Jesus, who graciously died for sinners, we might

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hold back our love from degenerate or difficult people. We struggle with our own insecurities and self-centeredness, which limit our capacity to love others. Our love is contaminated by our desire for appreciation and approval.

Yet as the reality of Christ's love on the cross takes root in our lives, his love flows into us and through us. 1 John 4:9-12 says,

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world *that we might live through him*. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, *God lives in us and his love is made complete in us*.

9. *What kinds of people are hard for you to love? How can focusing on the cross motivate you to love them?*
  
10. *What are some of the root causes of our inability to love as we should? How has God helped you overcome your weaknesses, as you experience healing and reorientation?*
  
11. *Reflect on 1 John 4:12 (printed on previous page). Tell of a time when you experienced God and his love by sharing it with others.*

Love

## **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?



# 2

## Justification

Harry Carey, the legendary baseball announcer who led Chicago crowds in “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” during the seventh inning stretch, once described his hope for salvation as, “The umpire will call you safe.”

Many people have a similar hope, either that their performance will be good enough to get into heaven, or that God will call them safe when they are clearly out.

1. *What do you think of Harry Carey’s analogy of salvation? How might you use it in a discussion with someone who doesn’t see a need to accept Christ as Savior and Lord?*

### ***The Cross Upholds God’s Righteousness***

An online post asks, “If God is all-powerful and all-forgiving, why must he send his son to die for sins? Couldn’t God just forgive the sins without sending his son down in human form to die?”

That might sound nice, even right, but think about the implications of God declaring blanket amnesty. If a judge never gives a guilty verdict, the social order of the community is destroyed. If a school administrator allows a bully to terrorize the classrooms and hallways, teachers and students are victimized.

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God's righteousness is the foundation of all righteousness, so if God did not maintain justice, the cosmic moral structure would collapse. There would be anarchy in heaven as well as on earth, and the devil and his angels would run rampant. Love and harmony would be destroyed, to be replaced by fear and turmoil.

A righteous God cannot ignore or condone evil. Sin must have consequences, not only to preserve the moral order, but because God is holy and righteous. In Romans 3:25-26, Paul describes the purpose of the cross as a demonstration or vindication of God's justice and righteousness.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith. He did this *to demonstrate his righteousness*, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — he did it *to demonstrate his righteousness* at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Justice must be served, but imagine the astonishment of the angels when God revealed that he himself would bear the consequences of human sin! God the Son would join the human race, endure the corruption of evil, and bear the penalty of death. God's justice would be upheld, for no one in heaven or earth could dare to accuse him of ignoring evil or abandoning judgment.

At the cross, the Son took upon himself the aggregated sins of all humanity — past, present, and future (Isaiah 53:6). The immensity of the punishment due to sinners was matched by the immense stroke of the wrath of God, as the Son bore the just consequences of the sins of all, even the penalty of death. The scales of justice were balanced: On



## Justification

one side was a vast collection of human sins, and on the other side the suffering and death of the infinite, perfect, only-begotten Son of God.<sup>2</sup>

2. *Give examples of how the ethical foundations of society are undermined when the righteous judgment of God is forgotten.*
3. *How does the cross vindicate God as righteous?*

### ***The Cross Justifies Sinners***

*He did this to demonstrate his righteousness . . .  
so as to be to be just and the one who justifies . . .”*

The cross balances the cosmic scales of justice and preserves the righteousness of God. Yet all is not right with the world, as Paul declares in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” How should a righteous God respond to human sin?

Because God has been proven righteous at the cross, he is able to forgive. However, forgiveness without accountability would blur the lines between good and evil, leaving us adrift in a sea of moral confusion. On the other hand, harsh justice would only drive us further away from God and the glory he intends for us.

The cross is God’s way of justifying sinners. It confronts us with the seriousness of our sin — so serious that it required the sinless Son of God to suffer and die for us. At the same time, it offers a path to forgiveness, for the just penalty of our sin has been paid.

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Folkert, *God through Cosmic Lenses* (Wipf and Stock, 2022), 147.

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A popular courtroom analogy illustrates justification. An offender appears before a judge, who feels compassion but is obligated to follow the law. The judge pronounces the mandatory harsh sentence, but then he removes his robe, steps down from the bench, takes the place of the offender, and suffers the punishment. In variations of the analogy, the judge's son takes the place of the offender or takes the role of the defense attorney to argue that the offender's debt has been paid.

The courtroom analogy is not without biblical support, and it illustrates a profound truth: God is just, and God is merciful. If pressed too far, however, the analogy breaks down and might create false impressions about God's holiness, righteousness, and love.

4. *Why is the cross necessary for forgiveness?*
5. *What is helpful about the courtroom analogy? What support do you find for it in Isaiah 53:4-6, Romans 5:8-10, and Galatians 3:10, 13?*
6. *What are some thorny problems raised by the analogy? Have you been troubled by any of those?*

### ***The Cross Makes Us Right with God***

No analogy is perfect, and viewing the cross solely through the lens of the legal system can create a cold and impersonal perception of God's righteousness, in which God is bound to uphold the law and the sole purpose of the cross is to avert punishment.

## Justification

In Romans 3:25, Paul offers a different analogy from the Old Testament:

God presented Christ as *a sacrifice of atonement*, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness.

The sacrifice of atonement is more than an analogy; it is a God-ordained model (or type) that prefigured the cross of Christ in the Old Testament.

The bloody Old Testament sacrifices are sometimes viewed as barbaric attempts to appease God and pay for sins, thus avoiding punishment. That was not the purpose of the sacrifices, as Hebrews 10:4 tells us: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The main purpose of the sacrifices was to make people right with God.

On the yearly Day of Atonement (*yom kippur*), the high priest sacrificed a bull and two goats for his own sins and the sins of the people. He went into the Most Holy Place — the intimate presence of God — and sprinkled the blood of the animals on the Ark of the Covenant. The blood of the sacrifice brought into the holy presence of God was a powerful statement of God’s willingness to forgive and cleanse his people from sin. Leviticus 16:30 promised, “On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then you will be clean from all your sins.”

Hebrews 9:13-14 views the cross through a similar lens:

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

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Old Testament sacrifices of atonement were repeated regularly, and offerings for sin and guilt were opportunities for believers to confess their sins and renew their relationship with God. In the new covenant, the death of Christ on the cross is a once-for-all sacrifice of atonement, and we are free to claim it for ourselves and start out fresh every day.

7. *How would you have felt as an Israelite on the Day of Atonement? How does viewing Christ's death on the cross as "an atoning sacrifice" enrich your connection with what he did for you there?*

### ***Righteousness Is Received by Faith***

*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith.*

Righteousness through the cross is a gift of God's grace, and it is received by faith. The Greek word, *pistis*, more often means "trust," and that is Paul's meaning. Faith in Christ is relying on what he has done to justify us, instead of relying on self-justification.

Self-justification takes many forms. Some people try to balance out their sins by going to church, giving generously, or doing good deeds. Others think God should give them credit for good intentions, feeling intensely sorry for their sins, or making amends by restitution or penance.

If any of those would work, Christ's death on the cross would have been unnecessary! The Son of God could have remained safely in heaven without enduring the brokenness of the world and the devastating effects of evil.

## Justification

Self-justification is a hopeless endeavor, and those who trust in their ability to justify themselves cut themselves off from God's provision for righteousness. Paul pointedly says that God justifies those who put their trust in Jesus and the redemption that came through him.

8. *What are some meanings of the word "faith" in today's culture? What meaning does Paul give to "faith in Jesus"? Why is faith essential for justification?*
9. *In Galatians 5:11, Paul writes of "the offense of the cross." Why might people resist accepting the cross as the way of righteousness?*
10. *Identify some of the most common ways in which people try to justify themselves before God. What is their motivation, and what effect does it have on them?*

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?



# 3

## Reconciliation

Our previous conversation focused on Romans 3:21-26, where Paul says that Christ shed his blood on the cross so God could be “just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” This can be illustrated by an analogy of a just judge, who follows the law in pronouncing judgment and then takes the penalty the offender deserves.

Lawful justification is not enough, however. In Romans 5:1-12, Paul shifts the focus from justification to reconciliation:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand . . . For if while we were enemies we were *reconciled* to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been *reconciled*, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received *reconciliation*.

A parable of a father and a wayward son illustrates reconciliation. The father is a pillar of the community, and the son had the advantages of a loving home, moral training, good schools, and great opportunities. Yet from early days he rebelled, and when he went off to college he chose a life of immorality and debauchery. Feeling ashamed, he broke off all contact with his father, dropped out of

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school, and began to sell drugs. A drug deal went bad, a woman was shot, and the young man was arrested and charged.

What does the father do with his wayward son? Does he publicly disown him, to avoid the shame of being identified with such a lowlife criminal? Does he quietly forgive his son, refusing to condemn him for his poor choices? Does he wash his hands of his obligations to his son, saying, “He didn’t want my help before; now he is on his own”?

No, the father — a pillar of the community — takes a walk of shame. As he exits his car at the courthouse, his picture is taken, to appear in the tabloids. As he walks into the courtroom, his son barely acknowledges that he is there. Yet the father stands in solidarity with his son, sharing the pain and shame that he does not deserve. Why is he there? He hopes that, by his presence, the son may be *reconciled* to him.

1. Compare the analogy of the judge with the parable of the father. What truths do each of them illustrate?

### ***The Cross Overcomes Shame and Alienation***

After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they hid from him in shame. They realized they were naked and they were afraid of God, not only because they had disobeyed and broken the only rule of the garden, but because their nakedness exposed their tainted humanity.

Our culture resists the concept of shame, but many people have a vague sense of unworthiness. They are ashamed of their bodies or their filthy minds. They feel like they have disappointed parents or failed friends. They compare themselves unfavorably to other people, and they judge themselves for not reaching their full potential.



## Reconciliation

Adam and Eve vainly tried to hide their shame with fig leaves. People today hide behind denial, excuses, good deeds, or even religion. Some avoid thinking about God, because they fear that he will uncover the darkest recesses of their being. Others wallow in unworthiness and self-hatred, convinced that God is unable or unwilling to help them.

The cross exposed Jesus to the shame that afflicts humanity, for in the ancient world the cross was the ultimate symbol of shame. Jews identified the cross with Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse." Greeks and Romans also recognized death by crucifixion as the most degrading kind of punishment.

Jesus hung on a cross of shame, flanked by criminals, naked before mockers, his blood dripping for all to see, and gasping for breath. For shame! Yet the shame was not for who he was or what he had done, as he was the blameless Son of God. No, the shame he bore was the shame of those who betrayed him, falsely accused him, unjustly sentenced him, mocked him with a crown of thorns, and joined the jeering mob. Even more, it was the shame of everyone who fails to honor God, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

Why did the Son of God take on the shame of humanity? Paul says in Colossians 1:19-22,

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [the Son], and 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.

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

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present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

The cross reconciles us to God by demolishing the barrier of shame that makes us “enemies of God in our minds.” It removes the stain of sin and rebellion that make us unworthy before God, and it seals with the blood of Jesus a covenant of peace and reconciliation.

2. *What are some sources of shame in our culture? Are people more ashamed of disobeying God’s law, or of not measuring up to the standards of themselves and others?*
  
3. *What are some ways in which people avoid feelings of unworthiness and shame? What effect does this have on themselves and others? How does it affect their relationship with God?*

### ***The Cross Reconciles through Truth and Grace***

A skeptical theologian, author of twenty-two books, was invited to speak at a Christian college. He entertained questions at the end of his lecture, and someone asked, “What do you think of the cross?” He replied, “If forgiveness was really necessary, certainly God could have come up with a better way.”

The cross *is* necessary for forgiveness, of course, for the alternative would be for God to ignore or tolerate sin. That would negate the righteousness of God and undermine the foundations of righteousness.

## Reconciliation

Yet why did the torture and crucifixion of Jesus need to be such a public spectacle? Why couldn't the Son have borne the sin of the world in a hidden corner of the universe, or in a different universe altogether? If he had to take on human flesh, why couldn't he have died in the upper room, while telling his disciples that he loved them and was dying so they could be forgiven?

Forgiveness is a personal affair, which might involve only the offended party. When we forgive, we let go of our anger and resentment, freeing us to love people despite their faults. Yet forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation.

Reconciliation requires both parties to recognize the harm and hurt that caused alienation. It requires truth, as well as grace, to remove the barriers to reconciliation.

The cross is a compelling demonstration of both truth and grace. It graphically displays the depths of human depravity, and it exhibits God's willingness to reconcile and renew a life-giving relationship. Peter boldly declared the sin of the cross and the grace of the gospel in Acts 3:14-19.

You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life. . . . Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

4. *If two parties seek reconciliation without recognizing the offense, what evil consequences might ensue?*

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5. *How does the spectacle of the cross demonstrate truth and grace? Why are both necessary for reconciliation with God?*
  
6. *How does God's act of reconciliation on the cross inspire you to seek reconciliation with people who have wronged you?*

### ***The Cross Invites All to Be Reconciled with God***

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. There are no plush seats, no VIP passes, and no skyboxes. There are no fences, no customs agents, and no background checks.

Religious or moral people do not have preferred access to the cross. In Ephesians 2:13-17, Paul says to gentiles raised in a pagan culture,

In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For *he himself is our peace . . . to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

All are welcome at the cross, and that changes how we see the people around us. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:16-18,

From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who *reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was*

## Reconciliation

*reconciling* the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the *message of reconciliation*. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: *Be reconciled to God.*

From a worldly point of view, we might see a coworker who is angry at the world, a scheming manipulator, or a boss who abuses power. We might see a neighbor of another race or culture, a person of questionable morals, or a strident atheist. But through the cross, we can see each of these people as someone who is welcome to come to the cross of Jesus.

God has "committed to us the message of reconciliation." Yes, we speak the truth of the cross: Sin dishonors the God who made us for his glory, abuse harms people God loves, and the alienation and shame that haunts us can only be remedied by the cross of Jesus Christ. Yet we offer reconciliation with God: wiping the slate clean, restoring a connection with God, and renewing the glory lost by sin and rebellion.

7. *How does the cross humble you? How do stories of "radical conversions" deepen your understanding of God's grace?*
  
8. *Identify individuals or groups of people that "from a worldly point of view" appear to be beyond hope of salvation. How does Paul challenge your assumptions about those people?*
  
9. *Think about a non-Christian person you know. How could you present the good news as "a message of reconciliation"? How*

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*does this compare with “evangelistic techniques” you have learned in the past?*

### **PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?

# 4

## Redemption

Jesus Christ gave himself for us *to redeem us* from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

—Titus 2:14

Redemption is a common theme in today's culture. In movies, someone who has made a mess of life finds redemption in a new relationship, a change of attitude, or a new purpose. In sports, a baseball player who commits an error redeems himself by hitting a home run. In business, a salesperson who fails to meet her goal redeems herself by making a big sale. In marriage, an inconsiderate husband seeks redemption by surprising his wife with an extravagant gift.

Redemption rescues a reputation, heals a relationship, or restores a lost soul. Yet our own efforts at redemption often fall short. The purpose of the cross of Christ is to provide the redemption we cannot provide for ourselves.

1. *How do human efforts at redemption sometimes fall short? What underlying problems might not be fixed by our attempts at redeeming ourselves?*

### *The Cross Purchases Freedom*

When Paul wrote about redemption, his readers would think of slavery, which was widespread in the Greco-Roman world. A significant number of Christians were slaves, and Paul spoke to slaves and masters in Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

The Greek word for redemption, *lutron*, was the price of freedom. A relative or benefactor might purchase freedom for a slave, or an owner might grant freedom contingent upon some benefit or payment from the freed slave.

Jesus described a less obvious form of slavery:

To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How then can you say that we will be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin . . . If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

—John 8:31-36,

Slavery to sin might be manifested in addictive behavior, negative thoughts, or harsh words that involuntarily emerge from our mouths. Paul warns about enslaving influences in Colossians 2:8, "*Make sure no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.*" The captivating philosophies of today might be expressed through advertising, online influencers, political ideologies, or "cultural tribes."

The greatest redemption story of the Old Testament is the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites were enslaved by both Pharaoh and the



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Egyptian culture, and God promised to redeem them and take them as his own.

I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and *I will redeem you* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.

—Exodus 6:6-7

God did not need to purchase the Israelite slaves to set them free; he defeated the powers that held them captive. He sent ten plagues to overpower the gods of Egypt, he unnerved the ruling Pharaoh, and he destroyed the pursuing armies. He not only freed his people from the Egyptians and their culture; he took ownership and created a new culture for them in the wilderness and the promised land.

The tenth plague resulted in the death of every firstborn son in Egypt. Israelite heirs were saved by obeying God's instruction to kill a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorframes of their houses. The angel of death "passed over" the dwellings with blood on the doorframe.

The sacrificial lamb of the Passover delivered the firstborn from death and ensured the future of the family. That model of substitution was filled with much deeper meaning by Jesus. John the Baptist identified Jesus as "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul declares, "*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*" Similarly, 1 Peter 1:19 says, "*You were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*"

As the fulfillment of the Passover lamb, Jesus offers redemption to all who are enslaved by sin. In Revelation 5:9-12, the Lamb of God

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opens the scroll that unlocks a glorious future, and all heaven joins to say,

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased for God persons  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be  
a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth . . .

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!

—Revelation 5:9-12

2. *Give specific examples of how sin enslaves people. Why is it so hard to escape the grip of sin?*
3. *Identify some of the companies, influencers, and movements that try to “own” us by their influence or manipulation.*
4. *First Peter 2:16 instructs us to “live as God’s slaves.” How is this implied by the biblical texts cited in this section? (For further study, see Romans 6:16-22, which culminates in, “now that you have been set free from sin and become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”)*
5. *Jesus died during the festival of the Passover, and as he celebrated the meal with his disciples, he identified the bread and*

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*cup with his body and blood. He referred to the cup as “the new covenant in my blood.” How does the connection with the Passover enrich your understanding of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper?*

### ***The Cross Is a Commitment of Kinship***

God’s redemption does more than grant freedom; it cements a relationship between God and his people. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he identified himself by his covenant relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “I have seen the misery of *my people* . . . I have come down to *rescue* them.” His message to the Israelites was, “*I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God*” (Exo 6:7).

Several Hebrew words can be translated as “redeem,” and the word used in Exodus 6:7 is remarkable, even surprising. It is the verb form of *goel*, which denotes a close relative who acts on behalf of someone in need. The *goel*, or guardian-redeemer, had the right and responsibility to protect justice, buy back property that had been sold for debts, and free those who had been forced into slavery. Leviticus 25:47-49 says,

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to a foreigner or to a member of the foreigner’s clan, they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them: An uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in their clan may redeem them. Or if they prosper, they may redeem themselves.

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Jesus became a man so that he could be our *goel* — our kinsman, our guardian-redeemer! Hebrews 2:11-15 says,

Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are *of the same family*. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

Galatians 4:4-7 expands upon our kinship with Jesus Christ, using the imagery of adoption as well as redemption:

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, *to redeem* those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "*Abba, Father.*" So *you are no longer a slave, but God's child*; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

6. *Is your view of God more like a slave master or a guardian-redeemer? How does each image help you understand redemption in Christ?*
  
7. *How far would you go to help your siblings? What is remarkable about what Jesus did for us?*

### ***The Cross Conveys Value***

Jesus said in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a *ransom* for [on behalf of] many." The word "ransom" is perplexing if we think of a ransom being paid

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to a kidnaper holding a hostage. It would be wrong to imagine God paying a ransom to the devil or Jesus paying a ransom to his Father.

Jesus was not focused on who might receive a ransom payment; he was focused on the price he paid for our freedom. First Peter 1:19-20 reminds us of the high price of redemption:

It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that *you were redeemed* from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

The high price of our redemption is both humbling and empowering. It is humbling, because it reminds us of our dire condition as slaves to sin and death. It is empowering, because it provides irrefutable proof of our value to the God of the universe.

I was once seated across from a banker, and next to a small plastic rack of his personal cards was another rack of cards that said, "I am worth \_\_\_\_\_." I assume the purpose of the card was to fill in the value of the customer's bank accounts.

We are worth more than any amount of money, and the value God places on us at the cross enables us to resist any attempt to buy our allegiance. Our asking price is too high, and when the powers of this world make their bids to "own" us, their offers don't come close to what God gave for us.

8. *How do you sometimes try to prove your worth? What effect does that have on you?*
  
9. *Do you sometimes feel enslaved by a need to be busy and productive? How does that affect you? How can recognizing*

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*your value to God free you from undue pressure, while making you even more fruitful?*

- 10. Identify some of the ways the world tries to "own" us. What is offered, and what is promised in return? In practical terms, how do you **offset** worldly offers with your value in following Christ?*

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?

# 5

## Rehabilitation

“I’m only human,” we say. While it is good to recognize our limitations, there is something wistful, even sad, about that statement. We would like to be better, stronger, wiser — proud to be human, as the crown of God’s creation.

When we look at our world, we see on every hand how humanity has gone astray. Wars, mass shootings, abuse, and violent crime shock our senses. Political and social institutions are undermined by unethical behavior and self-interest. The beauty of the earth is blemished by greed and indifference, while the rights of the poor and vulnerable are trampled by the rich and powerful.

If we are honest, we recognize distortions in our own human nature. We would like to correct our mistakes, avoid wrong turns, and seize missed opportunities. We regret words we have said and relationships we have neglected. We resolve to do better in the future, but we continue to struggle with our flawed humanity.

1. *Give examples of how people say, “I’m only human,” to excuse bad behavior.*
2. *What is one thing that frustrates you about yourself?*

## *The Cross Exposes the Corruption of Humanity*

Many people have a hard time understanding how the death of a man in the long-distant past can affect the condition of humanity today. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul offers an explanation based on the fall of humanity in Genesis.

Adam and Eve lived blissfully in the garden of Eden. They were in touch with God, in harmony with God's world, and in a perfect relationship with each other: no power struggles, no fear, and nothing to hide.

When they disobeyed God, their perfect humanity, created in the image of God, was corrupted. They were expelled from the garden into a world of pain, toil, violence, and iniquity. Death reigned, as Cain killed his own brother and then feared for his life. Spiritual death loomed as well, as they had lost the close communion they had enjoyed with God.

The story of Adam and Eve is not confined to the far-distant past; it is part of our story. The Hebrew word for man is *adam*, and Romans 5:12 says that Adam represents all of humanity: "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, *death came to all people, because all sinned.*"

That statement is puzzling in an individualistic Western worldview, but in the famous words of John Donne, "No man is an island." We are profoundly influenced by family background and cultural heritage. We are shaped by our environment: access to clean air, water, sanitation, healthy food, medical care, education, accumulated knowledge, and technology. Our personalities are molded by the actions of people around us, and our culture frames our worldview.

Our primary connection to Adam and Eve is not genetic or cultural, however, but realistic. Paul says, "... death came to all people, *because all sinned.*" Adam's condition is our condition, for, "All have



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sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). His death is our death, because, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

When the Son of God took on the body of Jesus, he was submerged in the story of humanity. Herod tried to kill him as a baby, a crowd in Nazareth attempted to push him off a cliff, and self-serving religious leaders tried to bring him down.

Unlike Adam, Jesus did not sin (Heb 4:15). Yet, as a son of Adam, he endured the wages of sin at the cross. One of his own disciples betrayed him, and his closest friends abandoned him in his time of need. He was falsely accused in the dead of night, condemned by a corrupt judicial system, mocked by a blood-thirsty mob, and hung on a cross with criminals. Finally, he took his last breath, sharing death with the sons and daughters of Adam.

3. *Give examples of how the systemic corruption of humanity affects individuals.*
4. *If Jesus came to our country today, who would be threatened by him, and who might wish to eliminate, even kill him? Who might misunderstand him? Who might feel unworthy of his love? Who might disappoint him by their actions?*

### ***The Cross Remodels Humanity***

If Adam represents all humanity, couldn't there be a do-over for his disobedience? It might be too late for him, but we might like a chance to obey God and rehabilitate our lives. Yet it is not that simple, for our humanity is already corrupted from birth. (See Psalm 51:5.)

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Brainstorming, we might imagine God creating a new strand of humanity. Perhaps he would create a new Adam and Eve in a new garden, carved out of this world or on a different planet. Or, he might create or evolve a new breed, immune to corruption. That would leave us on the outside, however, and God loves us too much to abandon us!

In his love, God did something more audacious. The incorruptible Son of God, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Col 1:15), joined the human race. He took on the likeness and nature of a man, in order to redeem humanity.

It is not far from the truth to say that Jesus is humanity’s do-over. In Romans 5:14, Paul identifies Adam as “a pattern [*tupos*, or type] of the one to come.” Adam represents humanity in his sin, but in a greater way, Jesus represents redeemed humanity in his obedience.

Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through *the disobedience of the one man* the many were made sinners, so also through *the obedience of the one man* the many will be made righteous.

—Romans 5:18-19

In the garden, Satan offered Adam the world — “knowledge of good and evil,” and Adam *disobeyed* God’s direct command. In the wilderness, the devil offered Jesus the world — “all the kingdoms of the world,” and Jesus *obeyed* God’s commandment to worship only him.

Jesus’ obedience to the Father took him all the way to the cross. Shortly before his arrest, he told his disciples, “I have kept my father’s commands” (John 15:10). In the garden of Gethsemane (in contrast to Adam in the garden of Eden) he said to his Father, “May your will be done.”

Paul emphasizes the human obedience of Jesus in Philippians 2:8.

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Being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming *obedient* to death —  
even death on a cross!

How, then, does the death of a man in the long-distant past affect the condition of humanity today? By his obedience, Jesus initiated a new way of being human — not self-seeking rebellion, but loving submission to God the Father. There are now two strands of humanity, one in the pattern of Adam, and the other in the pattern of Jesus.

Our connection with Adam is natural; like him, we sin and deserve death. Our connection with Jesus is only by the gracious gift of God.

. . . Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! . . . For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

— Romans 5:14-17

Although we continue to be plagued by the residual effects of Adam's disobedience, Christ's obedience in going to the cross releases us from the inevitability of corruption, rebellion, and death, and opens the way to a life of righteousness and glory.

Our ultimate hope is to share in the new humanity of the resurrected Christ. By the grace of God, our humanity will be reformed into his image:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive . . . The first man was of the

## Cross Purposes

dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

—1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 47-49

5. *How would you answer someone who has a hard time understanding how the death of Jesus in the long-distant past offers new life today?*
  
6. *In the text of Romans 5:14-17 (on the previous page), underline the words “trespass,” “death,” and “died.” Circle the words “grace,” “gift,” and “life.” What does this indicate about how we connect with Adam and Christ?*
  
7. *Does Jesus Christ offer more than a “do-over”? What do you think Paul means in Romans 5:17 when he says, “How much more . . . ?”*

### ***The Cross Reboots Humanity***

An analogy: Identical twins are separated at birth and adopted, one to a healthy home, and the other to abuse and neglect. The “evil twin” naturally finds trouble everywhere, and he bullies vulnerable students at school, betrays his friends, and finally pledges allegiance to a gang. The other twin is blessed with good character, a compassionate heart, and a strong will to do what is right.

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The “good twin” loves his brother, and he proposes a daring plan. He will leave the high-quality school he enjoys to take the place of his brother for a few months and break the destructive patterns that have been set.

The plan is in trouble from the start. His twin has no real friends, and the misfits who gather around him set him up to take the fall for a crime. He is rejected, punished, and eventually expelled from school.

In the analogy, his father is president of the school board, and it all gets sorted out. The out-of-control school gets a new principal, the gang is reined in, and the “evil twin” is allowed back in school, with a guarantee of a fresh start. The sacrifice of his brother has given him a new identity and a new chance at life.

Yet his new life requires a radical transformation. His character, emotions, and thought patterns have been warped by years of abuse and neglect. He must embrace the new identity created by his brother. He will need to make hard choices every day and suffer resistance and rejection. Even then, he will need lots of help. Maybe if he could be adopted by the father, mentored by his brother, and helped by a wise therapist . . .

You can probably see where this is going. The cross and resurrection of Christ offer an alternative to the old way of life represented by Adam, but the legacy of human depravity is still with us. As Paul says in Romans 7:25, “In my mind I am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature [lit., flesh] a slave to the law of sin.”

To move into a new way of life, we must embrace the new life Christ has secured as our substitute. (This is what it means to “accept Christ.”) We acknowledge his sacrifice on our behalf, and we receive the gift of a new way of life. We abandon our old way of life, corrupted by sin and rebellion, and we live our lives as he would. Paul summarizes this in Galatians 2:20,

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I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, *I live by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Our transformation will not be easy, but by faith, our minds are infused with the mind of Christ! In Romans 8:5-11, Paul adapts the imagery of Adam and Christ to contrast a mind governed by “the flesh” (of Adam) and a mind governed by “the Spirit” (of Christ).<sup>3</sup>

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul uses interchangeably “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” and “the Spirit of Christ.” He certainly has the Holy Spirit in mind.

## Rehabilitation

8. *What old patterns of life are hard for you to break? How have your thought patterns been transformed by your relationship with Christ?*
  
9. *Review the understandings of the cross we have considered previously: love, justification, reconciliation, and redemption. How does today's study relate to each of them?*
  
10. *In Romans 6:1-14, Paul uses the imagery of baptism to expand upon the moral implications of dying to the old self and embracing a new life in Christ. What do you find helpful in the connections he makes?*

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?





# 6

## Confronting Darkness

“That is so wrong,” we say. Earthquakes. School shootings. Terrorism. Child abuse. Corrupt politics. Cancer. Alzheimer’s. Death.

When those things happen, people ask, “Why does God allow it?” If God is loving and good, and God is all-powerful, why does he allow such evil and suffering? There is no easy answer.

Skeptics answer by denying either God’s power or his goodness, but in doing so, they are left adrift in a chaotic sea of uncertainty, without hope of relief. People of faith hang on to the hope that God is still loving and good, trusting that he will overcome the darkness that plagues us.

When darkness surrounds us, we gain little from asking, “Why does God allow this?” A better question is, “What does God do about it?” The astounding answer to that question is found in the cross, validated by Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

1. *Tell about a time when you were inclined to ask, “Why does God allow this?”*
2. *Where do you see evil and suffering in the world today? What troubles you most about it?*

## *The Cross and Suffering*

How does God respond to the suffering that plagues humanity? Does he gaze down from heaven, untouched by the pain and distress, safe from the injustice and cruelty that plagues humanity? Would a good and loving God be unaffected by human suffering?

In the body of Jesus, God immersed himself in the suffering of humanity. Hebrews 2:10-11 says,

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.

In his life, Jesus chose to experience hunger and homelessness, and he shared in the turmoil of the sick and oppressed. He was misunderstood, criticized, despised, and rejected. Even more, the cross loomed on the horizon, and he repeatedly told his disciples that he must suffer and die (Luke 9:22, 17:25, 22:15, 24:26, 24:46). Why did he choose to die such a gruesome death?

Jewish holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote in his memoirs, *Night*, of his crisis of faith in the concentration camps. He describes the hanging of a child — a kind, innocent, brave child — by the Nazis:

He remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a

## Confronting Darkness

voice answer: "Where He is? This is where — hanging here from this gallows."<sup>4</sup>

I don't know how to take that. For Wiesel, the voice in his mind was a voice of despair, for if God did not rescue an innocent child, what kind of God is he? Yet Christians view the same scene through the lens of the cross, where Christ hangs on the gallows with all of humanity. In fact, a Jewish scripture, Isaiah 53:3-11, prophesied that the Messiah would suffer with his people to give them new life.

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.  
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.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and afflicted,  
Yet he did not open his mouth  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished...  
After he has suffered,  
he will see the light of life and be satisfied.

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<sup>4</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, tr. Marion Wiesel, 63-68.

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This is the culmination of Isaiah 41-53, a series of prophecies about a “servant,” who would save God’s chosen people. Most Jews identify the servant as an image of God’s chosen people, whose suffering, repentance, and faithfulness bring salvation. Wiesel wrote in his memoir, “In those days, I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended on every one of *my* deeds, on every one of *my* prayers.”

Yet Isaiah 53 points to an individual servant, who would represent God’s people, sharing their suffering as well as their punishment. Christians identify the servant as Jesus, representing all of God’s people in his suffering and death.

When we suffer and ask, “Where is God?” we answer, “There he is — hanging on the cross.”

3. *How would you answer someone who denies the goodness of God because of the suffering in the world?*
4. *Give examples of the depths of suffering some people experience today. How might the suffering of Jesus help them face their own suffering?*
5. *For further study: Read Isaiah 42:1-9, 44:1-5, and 49:5-7. How did Jesus fulfill the role of Israel in bringing salvation to the world?*

### *The Cross and the Powers of Darkness*

If Christ chose to share our suffering, we can be assured that he loves and cares for us. Yet bad things still happen. People get sick and die. Sin corrupts, causing discord, cruelty, and brokenness. Evil sometimes seems stronger than good, resulting in injustice, oppression, and strife. In our darker moments, we may wonder whether God is strong enough to overcome the evil powers that plague us.

Paul confidently answers our doubts by pointing to the cross, which decisively demonstrates the power of God over the powers of darkness: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15).

Throughout his life, Jesus confronted the powers of darkness: the devil in the wilderness, unclean spirits, and nasty accusations and rumors. The darkness grew as his death approached, and at his arrest, he said to his captors, “This is your hour, when darkness reigns.”

The power-hungry Jewish authorities falsely accused and illegally condemned him, and the crowds that had praised him with palms in their hands called for his crucifixion. A Roman ruler condemned him to death, while admitting his innocence. The soldiers spat on him and whipped him, and he hung with thieves on a cross of shame.

Behind the scenes, the devil was having a field day. Peter was so clueless that Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan.” Satan entered Judas, provoking him to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3). At the last supper, Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.”

When Jesus finally died, darkness descended on the earth for three hours. Death — the final enemy — had prevailed. The disciples were devastated, and the earth shook. Yet the powers of darkness had not reckoned with the power of God to defeat even the power of death. As Peter declared at Pentecost, “God raised Jesus from the dead,

## Cross Purposes

freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”

In defeating the power of death, Jesus broke the grip of all the powers of darkness, seen and unseen. Paul says in Ephesians 1:20-22,

God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet.

The powers of darkness underestimated the commitment and power of God demonstrated at the cross. Paul ironically says in 1 Corinthians 2:8, “None of the rulers of this age understood [the wisdom of the cross], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ not only defeated the powers of darkness; they destroyed their ultimate power to oppress humanity.

6. *Identify some of the powers of darkness in the world today. How did similar powers of darkness send Jesus to the cross?*
  
7. *Do you believe there are spiritual powers of darkness “behind the scenes” of human activity? What is the cosmic significance of the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and how does it encourage you?*

## *The Cross and Our Fear of the Dark*

God could have defeated the powers of darkness without sending his Son to earth to die on the cross. (Of course!) Yet that victory might have left humanity in the darkness of sin, suffering, and death.

The Son of God came to earth and confronted the powers of darkness as a man, so that humanity could share in his victory. Hebrews 2:14-15 says,

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

The cross of Christ gives us the power to confront the darkness in our own lives — not only death and the evil powers associated with it, but the darkness of the human soul and darkness around us. By embracing the cross, we can face life with confidence and strength.

Romans 6:6-12 illustrates how the cross can help us resist the power of sin. In effect, we can say, “Sin, you are dead to me.”

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.* Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

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In 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, Paul tells how the cross of Christ enabled him to stay strong in the face of suffering and persecution.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus*, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

In the dark night of the soul, when doubts arise and fear oppresses us, we cling to the cross for assurance and confidence:

If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . *Christ Jesus who died* — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:31-39

8. Describe a dark time in your life. How does the cross relate to your struggles at that time?



## Confronting Darkness

9. *Give examples of situations where it might help to say, "Sin, you are dead to me." How does the cross and resurrection of Jesus help you believe that is really true?*
  
10. *Romans 8:31-39 is a favorite text for many people. How does the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ make it more than wishful thinking?*

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

What part of this conversation was most meaningful to you?

What impact will it have on your thinking, emotions, and actions?



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