

The Message of the Cross

The term "gospel" derives from the Greek word meaning "good news." The story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is good news because it reveals God's plan to redeem humanity through His Son's sacrifice. This study explores why the cross is central to the gospel, how it fulfills God's eternal plan, and its transformative power in our lives.

1. The Gospel: God's Power for Salvation

The gospel is not merely a story but the very power of God to save those who believe.

A. Salvation Through Faith Alone

The righteousness of God is revealed through faith in Jesus Christ, not through human effort.

- Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes... For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."
- Additional Verse: Romans 3:22-24 – "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."
This underscores that salvation is a gift received through faith, not earned by works.

B. The Core Facts of the Gospel

The gospel centers on three historical events: Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

- 1 Corinthians 15:1-5: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve."
These events form the foundation of our hope, proving Jesus' victory over sin and death.

2. God's Eternal Plan

The cross was not a reaction to human sin but part of God's redemptive plan from the beginning.

A. Jesus, the Chosen Lamb

Jesus was foreordained as the sacrificial Lamb to redeem humanity.

- 1 Peter 1:18-21: "For you know that it was not with perishable things... that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."
- Additional Verse: Revelation 13:8 – "The Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world."
This confirms that God's plan for redemption was established before time began.

B. Hope Through Resurrection

Jesus' resurrection validates our faith and gives us hope for eternal life.

- 1 Peter 1:3 – "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."
The resurrection assures us that Jesus' sacrifice was accepted by God, securing our future.

3. Jesus' Sacrifice: A Life of Humility

Jesus' sacrifice began long before the cross, demonstrating His willingness to surrender divine privileges for our sake.

- Philippians 2:5-8: "Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"
- Additional Verse: Hebrews 2:17 – "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people."
Jesus' incarnation and humility highlight the depth of His love, culminating in His obedience to the cross.

4. Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled

The Old Testament foretold specific details of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, confirming the cross as God's deliberate plan.

A. Psalm 22: David's Prophecy (c. 1000 BC)

David's words vividly describe the Messiah's crucifixion, centuries before the practice existed.

- Psalm 22:1 – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Psalm 22:6 – "I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people."
- Psalm 22:7-8 – "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 'He trusts in the Lord,' they say, 'let the Lord rescue him.'"
- Psalm 22:16 – "They pierce my hands and my feet."
- Psalm 22:18 – "They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment."
- Additional Verse: Psalm 34:20 – "He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." (Fulfilled in John 19:36).
These details align precisely with Jesus' experience, proving divine inspiration.

B. Isaiah 53: The Suffering Servant (c. 750 BC)

Isaiah prophesied the Messiah's sacrificial role and triumph.

- Isaiah 52:14 – "His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being."
- Isaiah 53:3 – "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain."
- Isaiah 53:4-5 – "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering... by his wounds we are healed."
- Isaiah 53:7 – "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth."
- Isaiah 53:9 – "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."
- Isaiah 53:10 – "It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and... the Lord makes his life an offering for sin."
- Isaiah 53:11 – "After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied."
- Isaiah 53:12 – "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."
- Additional Verse: Isaiah 50:6 – "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting."
These prophecies connect directly to Jesus' passion, affirming the cross as the fulfillment of Scripture.

5. Reflecting on Matthew's Account

Read Matthew 26:31–28:10, reflecting on three themes: Jesus' willingness to suffer, our similarity to those around Him, and the fulfillment of prophecy.

A. Matthew 26:31-35, 36-46, 47-56 – Jesus' resolve to face the cross despite betrayal and abandonment by His disciples.

- Additional Verse: John 10:18 – "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."
Reflect: How do we, like the disciples, sometimes fail to stand with Jesus?

B. Matthew 26:57-68 – Jesus faces false accusations and physical abuse.

- Isaiah 52:14 – His form was disfigured.
Reflect: How does Jesus' silence under injustice challenge us to trust God in trials?

C. Matthew 26:69-75, 27:1-10 – Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal highlight human weakness.

- Additional Verse: Luke 22:31-32 – Jesus prays for Peter's faith to endure.
Reflect: How have we denied or betrayed Jesus in our actions?

D. Matthew 27:11-26 – Jesus is rejected by the crowd and sentenced to death.

- Isaiah 53:3, 7 – Despised, rejected, and silent before His accusers.
Reflect: How do we sometimes choose worldly approval over standing for Christ?

E. Matthew 27:27-31 – Jesus is mocked and beaten.

- Psalm 22:6 – Scorned and despised.
Reflect: How does Jesus' endurance inspire us to face persecution?

F. Matthew 27:32-44 – Jesus is crucified, fulfilling precise prophecies.

- Psalm 22:7-8, 16, 18 – Mocked, pierced, and clothes divided.
Reflect: How do these fulfilled prophecies strengthen our faith?

G. Matthew 27:45-56 – Jesus cries out in abandonment and dies.

- Psalm 22:1 – "My God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Additional Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:21 – "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us."
Reflect: How does Jesus' bearing our sin affect our view of God's love?

H. Matthew 27:57-61 – Jesus is buried in a rich man's tomb.

- Isaiah 53:9 – Assigned a grave with the rich.
Reflect: How does this detail affirm God's sovereignty?

I. Matthew 27:62-66 – The tomb is secured, yet God's plan prevails.

- Additional Verse: Psalm 16:10 – "You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead."
Reflect: How does God's power over death encourage us?

J. Matthew 28:1-10 – Jesus rises, fulfilling prophecy and securing our hope.

- Isaiah 53:11 – He sees the light of life after suffering.
- Additional Verse: 1 Corinthians 15:20 – "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."
Reflect: How does the resurrection transform our daily lives?

6. Christ's Suffering: Our Example and Salvation

Jesus' suffering on the cross both sets an example and provides atonement for our sins.

A. An Example to Follow

- 1 Peter 2:21-24 – “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example... By his wounds you have been healed.”
- Isaiah 53:4-5, 9, 12 – He bore our sins, without deceit or violence.
- Additional Verse: Hebrews 12:2 – “Fixing our eyes on Jesus... who for the joy set before him endured the cross.” Jesus’ trust in God through suffering calls us to persevere in faith.

B. A Call to Righteousness

Jesus’ sacrifice empowers us to die to sin and live for righteousness.

- Romans 6:11-13 – “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”
Reflect: How can we live out this transformation daily?

C. Personal Reflection

Consider the sins that nailed Jesus to the cross. How does His forgiveness impact your heart? Share specific examples and feelings.

7. The Cross: Condemnation and Salvation

The cross confronts us with our sinfulness while offering salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice.

A. Condemnation for Sin

Jesus’ sinless life exposes our guilt, as He faced temptation yet remained pure.

- Romans 8:1-4 – “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”
- Isaiah 53:10 – It was God’s will for Jesus to suffer as a guilt offering.
- Additional Verse: Hebrews 4:15 – “We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

B. Salvation Through Sacrifice

Jesus’ death atones for our sins, making Him our mediator before God.

- Isaiah 53:12 – He bore the sins of many and intercedes for us.
- Additional Verse: 1 Timothy 2:5-6 – “There is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”

C. Accepting the Good News

To receive the gospel, we must acknowledge our sin and accept Jesus’ sacrifice.

- John 3:16 – “For 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.”
Reflect: How will you respond to Jesus’ sacrifice for you?

Homework Assignment

- Review this study, focusing on the fulfilled prophecies and personal application.
- Continue reading the Gospel of John or begin the Book of Acts to see how the early church proclaimed the cross and resurrection.

Additional Material: The Power of Christ's Blood

A. Cleansing Through Sacrifice

Jesus' blood purifies us from guilt and sin, accepted by God as the perfect atonement.

- Hebrews 9:11-15, 22-28 – "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."
- Additional Verse: 1 John 1:7 – "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

B. The New Covenant

Jesus' sacrifice establishes a new covenant, ensuring forgiveness.

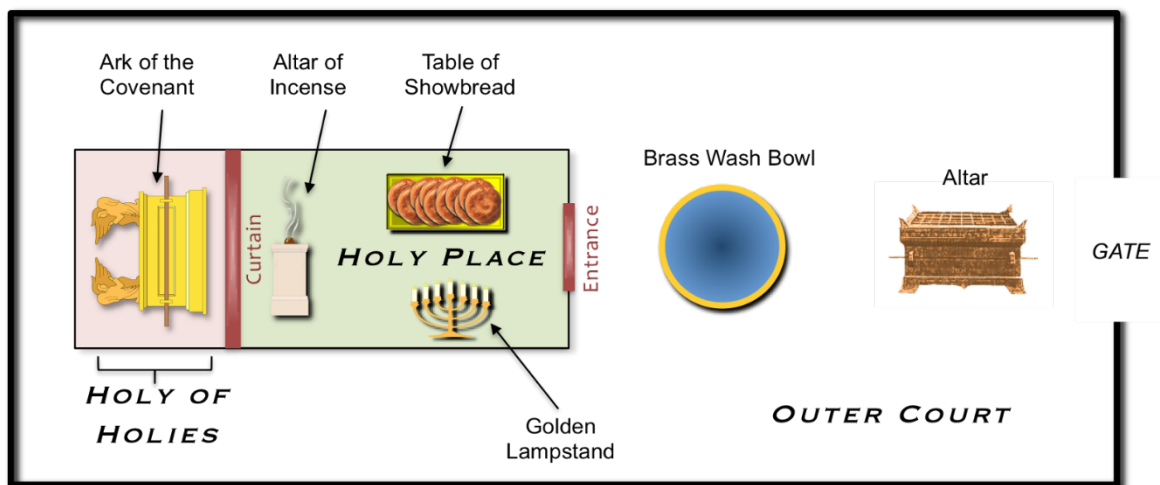
- Hebrews 8:12 – "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

C. The Tabernacle's Symbolism

The Old Testament tabernacle foreshadowed Jesus' sacrifice, emphasizing the need for atonement to approach God.

- Hebrews 10:19-22 – "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus."

The Plan of the Tabernacle Revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai



The Cross of Christ

The cross is the heart of the gospel, drawing all people to Jesus (John 12:32). Its power transforms lives by producing conviction and gratitude for God's salvation. Avoid diluting the message with human wisdom or secondary issues (1 Corinthians 1:17-18). Share this study with conviction, allowing your emotions to reflect the weight of Christ's sacrifice.

Key Passages and Reflections

- Matthew 26:39 – Jesus chose to drink the cup of suffering, showing His love for us.
- Matthew 27:46 – Jesus, like Barabbas, took our place, bearing our guilt. Reflect: We are Barabbas, set free by His sacrifice.
- 1 Peter 2:24 – "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." Reflect: How does this call us to change?
- Acts 2:36-37 – The cross pierces hearts, leading to repentance and obedience.

- Additional Verse: Galatians 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Analogies to Illustrate the Cross

- The Soldier: A soldier dives on a grenade to save his comrades, sacrificing his life for theirs.
- The Train: A father sacrifices his son to divert a train collision, saving many lives. God, in love, sacrificed His Son to save us from sin’s consequences.

Matthew’s Account (Condensed, cf. Mark 15:16–39)

- 26:36-46: Jesus prays in anguish, choosing God’s will.
- 26:57-68: Beaten and mocked, fulfilling Isaiah 52:14.
- 26:69-75: Peter’s denial mirrors our failures (Luke 9:23).
- 27:11-26: Flogged and sentenced, silent as in Isaiah 53:7.
- 27:27-31: Mocked with thorns, fulfilling Psalm 22:6.
- 27:32-44: Crucified, with pierced hands and divided clothes (Psalm 22:16, 18).
- 27:46: Abandoned, bearing our sin (Isaiah 59:2, 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Medical Account of the Crucifixion

Note: The medical account remains unchanged but is referenced here for context. It can be shared to illustrate the physical horror of the cross, though early Christians emphasized the resurrection’s victory (Acts 2:24, 3:15).

A Medical Account of the Crucifixion

Simplified and Amended¹

Hanging, electrocution, knee-capping, gas chamber: these punishments are feared. They all happen today, and we shudder as we think of the horror and pain. But as we shall see, these ordeals pale into insignificance compared with the bitter fate of Jesus Christ: crucifixion.

Few persons are crucified today (except by ISIS and various other terrorists). For us the cross remains confined to ornaments and jewelry, stained-glass windows, romanticized pictures, and statues portraying a serene death. Crucifixion was a form of execution refined by the Romans to a precise art. It was carefully conceived to produce a slow death with maximum pain. It was a public spectacle intended to deter other would-be criminals. It was a death to be feared.

Sweat like blood

Luke 22:24 says of Jesus, “and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” His sweat was unusually intense because his emotional state was unusually intense. Dehydration coupled with exhaustion further weakened him.

Beating

It was in this condition that Jesus faced the first physical abuse: punches and slaps to the face and head while blindfolded. Unable to anticipate the blows, Jesus was badly bruised, his mouth and eyes possibly injured. The psychological effects of the false trials should not be underestimated. Consider that Jesus faced them bruised, dehydrated, exhausted, possibly in shock.

Flogging

In the previous twelve hours Jesus had suffered emotional trauma, rejection by his closest friends, a cruel beating, and a sleepless night during which he had to walk miles between unjust hearings. Despite the fitness he must certainly have gained during his travels in Palestine, he was in no way prepared for the punishment of flogging. The effects would be worse as a result. A man to be flogged was stripped of his clothes and his hands tied to a post above his head. He was then whipped across the shoulders, back, buttocks, thighs and legs, the soldier standing behind and to one side of

the victim. The whip used—the flagellum—was designed to make this a devastating punishment, bringing the victim close to death: several short heavy leather thongs, with two small balls of lead or iron attached near the end of each. Pieces of sheep’s bone were sometimes included.

As the scourging proceeds, the heavy leather thongs produce first superficial cuts, then deeper damage to underlying tissues. Bleeding becomes severe when not only capillaries and veins are cut, but also arteries in the underlying muscles. The small metal balls first produce large, deep bruises which are broken open by further blows. The fragments of sheep’s bone rip the flesh as the whip is drawn back. When the beating is finished, the skin of the back is in ribbons, and the entire area torn and bleeding.

The words chosen by the gospel writers suggest that the scourging of Jesus was particularly severe: he was certainly at the point of collapse when he was cut down from the flogging-post.

The mocking

Jesus was allowed no time to recover before facing his next ordeal. Made to stand, he was dressed in a robe by jeering soldiers, crowned with a twisted band of thorny twigs, and to complete the parody, given a wooden staff as a king’s scepter. “Next, they spat on Jesus and struck him on the head with the wooden staff.” The long thorns were driven into the sensitive scalp tissue producing profuse bleeding, but even more terrible was the reopening of the wounds on Jesus’ back when the robe was torn off again.

Further weakened physically and emotionally, Jesus was led away to be executed.

The crucifixion

The wooden cross used by the Romans was too heavy to be carried by one man. Instead, the victim to be crucified was made to bear the detached crossbar across his shoulders, carrying it outside the city walls to the place of execution. (The heavy upright portion of the cross was permanently in position there.) Jesus was unable to carry his load—a beam weighing around 75 to 125 pounds (approximately 35–55 kg). He collapsed under the burden, and an onlooker was ordered to take it for him.

Jesus refused to drink the wine and myrrh offered him before the nails were driven in. (It would have dulled the pain.) Thrown down on his back with arms outstretched along the crossbar, nails were driven through Jesus’ wrists into the wood. These iron spikes, about 6 inches long and 3/8 inch thick, severed the large sensorimotor median nerve, causing excruciating pain in both arms. Carefully placed between bones and ligaments, they were able to bear the full weight of the crucified man.

In preparation for the nailing of the feet, Jesus was lifted up and the crossbar fixed to the upright post. Then with legs bent at the knee, two nails were used to pierce the ankles, so that his legs were astride the base of the upright part of the cross. Again there was severe nerve damage, and the pain caused was intense. It is important to note, however, that neither the wounds to the wrists or feet caused substantial bleeding, since no major arteries were ruptured. The executioner took care to ensure this, so that death would be slower and the suffering longer.

Now nailed to his cross, the real horror of crucifixion began. When the wrists were nailed to the crossbar, the elbows were intentionally left in a bent position so that the crucified man would hang with his arms above his head, the weight being taken on the nails in the wrists. Obviously, this was unbearably painful, but it had another effect: It is difficult to exhale in this position. In order to breathe out, and then take in fresh air, it was necessary to push the body up on the nailed feet. When the pain from the feet became unbearable, the victim would again slump down to hang by the arms. A terrible cycle of pain began: hanging by the arms, unable to breathe, pushing up on the feet to inhale quickly before again slumping down, and on and on.

This tortured activity became more and more difficult as Jesus’ back was scraped against the upright post, as muscle cramps set in because of the inadequate respiration, and as exhaustion grew more severe. Jesus suffered in this manner for several hours before, with a final cry, he died.

Cause of death

Many factors contributed to Jesus’ death. A combination of shock and suffocation killed most victims of crucifixion, but in Jesus’ case acute heart failure may have been the final trauma. This is suggested by his sudden death following

a loud cry, after only a few hours: a quick death, it seems (Pilate was surprised to find Jesus already dead). A fatal cardiac arrhythmia, or perhaps cardiac rupture, are likely candidates.

The spear wound

Jesus was already dead as the executioners broke the legs of the criminals crucified alongside (in order to speed their deaths). Instead, we read that a soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear. Where on his side? The word chosen by John suggests the ribs, and if the soldier intended to make Jesus' death certain, a wound to the heart was the obvious choice.

From the wound came a flow of "blood and water." This is consistent with the spear blow to the heart (especially from the right side, the traditional site of the wound). Rupturing the pericardium (the sac surrounding the heart) released a flow of watery serum, followed by blood as the heart was pierced.

Conclusion

The detailed accounts given in the gospels combined with the historical evidence on crucifixion bring us to a firm conclusion: modern medical knowledge supports the claim of the Scriptures that Jesus died on the cross.

Notes

This is a simplified medical account of Jesus' crucifixion (an adaptation of the well-known Truman Davis version). Other medical reports have been written—all useful but usually rather technical. This account aims to be readable to the average reader. I made this adaptation, with the assistance of Alex Mnatzaganian, in December 1989.

Highly recommended: Martin Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* (London: SCM Press, Ltd: 1981).

The original of our version of the Medical Account of the Crucifixion included these sentences: "*Haematidrosis*—bloody sweat—is rare, but well documented. Under great emotional stress, capillaries in the sweat glands can break, mixing blood in with the sweat. Luke's account is consistent with modern medical knowledge: Jesus was in emotional torment so intense that his body could not bear it." However, Luke only says that Jesus' sweat was like blood as it fell to the ground, not that it was mixed with blood. As disciples, we must be careful not to overstate the case. There is no evidence that the early Christians preached the gore of the cross in an effort to sicken or shame those they were trying to convert.

In some locations, trees were plentiful, while in others upright posts needed to be fixed into the ground. It is quite possible that in the place where Jesus was crucified there was an abundance of trees, in which case the patibulum he and Simon of Cyrene carried was simply attached to a tree. Of course, whether Jesus was killed on a tree literally, or on a tree by metonymy (on the wood of a tree) is incidental to the point of the crucifixion.

Personal Response

- 1 Peter 2:21-25, Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 – Christ's love compels us to live for Him. Share how the cross has impacted your life.
- Acts 2:22-38, Romans 5:6 – The cross reveals our sinfulness but offers salvation. How will you respond to this sacrifice?

Conclusion

The cross confronts us with our sin and God's love. It demands a response: repentance, faith, and a life dedicated to righteousness. Reflect on Romans 5:8 – "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." How will you live in light of the cross?