

The Cross God's Centerpiece

Galatians 1:3-5

Pastor John Miller

In Galatians 1:3-5, Paul says, "Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to Whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Someone said, "The Cross is God's centerpiece on the table of time." I love that picture. On the table of time, the centerpiece is the Cross. I've often said that all redemptive history revolves or orbits around the Cross of Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul has said, "For I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." For Paul, the Cross was the center and circumference of his life and of his preaching. Perhaps it is that seen no more clearly than in his letter to the Galatians.

Why is it that in Galatians—and we're not going to take the time to look at all the references to the Cross in this epistle of Galatians—Paul talks so much about the Cross of Jesus Christ? Let me tell you why.

The Galatians were a group of Christians in the area of Galatia, which is in ancient Asia Minor, or today it would be in Turkey, where churches were established by Paul on his first missionary journey. These churches were being invaded and influenced by false teachers. They were known as "Judaizers." The reason they were called Judaizers is because they were telling these Christians, who were mainly Gentiles, that they had to become Jews in order to be saved. Specifically, they said these Christians had to be circumcised, they had to keep the Law of Moses, they had to follow dietary laws and the rites and rituals of Judaism; they had to become Jewish in order to be a Christian. They had to keep laws and rules and regulations: "Don't drink this, don't touch that, don't eat that, worship on certain days."

Paul is actually writing this letter in response and saying, "No way!" He said, "If anyone preaches another gospel than that which we first delivered to you, let them be accursed" or "anathema." The Gospel is simply that Jesus died for our sins on the Cross. That work that Jesus did on the Cross is sufficient. It is complete. It is done. Through faith in Jesus Christ, all of our sins can be forgiven.

We don't become Christians by obeying rules and regulations or rites and rituals. We become Christians by faith in Jesus Christ and the work that He did—His person and His work on the Cross.

So Paul talks so much about the Cross in Galatians because they had drifted from the Cross; they had drifted from the grace of God, from the work of the Cross, from the sufficiency of Christ.

Even today you can come under the legalistic influence of someone who might say, “Well, you can’t be a Christian if you aren’t baptized.” I believe in baptism, but being baptized doesn’t make you a Christian. You don’t go to heaven because you’re baptized. And you don’t go to heaven because you take communion. You don’t go to heaven because you have a Christian haircut. (I got a Christian haircut yesterday. How do you like it?) So nothing we do earns or merits salvation. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves.”

This is why Paul says in Galatians 3:1, “Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed...”—or “evidently set forth”—“...among you as crucified?” He uses a unique phrase in the Greek for “clearly portrayed.” It is “prographó” or “painted” or actually “displayed before you.” The Cross of Christ had been painted before the Galatians. He said, “Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”—or “You drift away from God’s grace and the Cross of Jesus Christ?” So right at the beginning of Galatians at the opening of his letter—It’s actually his greeting—Paul wastes no time in talking about the Cross of Christ.

There are five facts that I want to share with you about the Cross. They are not exhaustive, but they are taken from this text and are pretty complete. I want you to understand them. They are basic and simple. It’s good to come back to the basics in understanding the Cross.

Fact number one: The Cross of Christ was voluntary. I want you to see it in verse 4. It says, “Who gave Himself.” Now who is the “Who” who gave Himself? The end of verse 3 tells us: “our Lord Jesus Christ.” Our Lord Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. The Bible says there is one God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They are one in essence. They are all divine. One God, three persons.

You say, “I don’t understand that.” Neither do I. That’s because He is God, and we are not. He is infinite, and we are finite. But God in three persons.

God the Son came down to earth. How did He come into this world? Through the womb of the virgin Mary. He took on humanity. Jesus Christ was both God and man. One person. He wasn’t a man and a God. Together He was one person with two natures—fully divine and fully human. His humanity was sinless, because He was born of a virgin. He was the Son of God. He lived a sinless life. He performed miracles. He taught like no one ever taught. He went to the Cross voluntarily. He laid down His life. There He suffered and died for our sins. Our sins were placed upon the pure and holy Son of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ was buried. Three days later what happened? I love the hymn:

Up from the grave He arose,

With a mighty triumph o’er His foes.

He arose a victor from the dark domain,

And He lives forever with His saints to reign.

...

Hallelujah, Christ arose!

Crucified, buried and risen from the dead. You can praise the Lord for that.

Not only did He arise, but He ascended. He went back to heaven bodily and physically from the Mount of Olives. They saw Him go, and the angel said, "The same Jesus, Who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." Right now Jesus is in heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He ever lives to make intercession for those who will call upon the name of the Lord.

So when Paul, in this opening greeting says, "our Lord Jesus Christ," he means the eternal Son of God, the incarnate Son of God, the crucified Son of God, the resurrected Son of God, the exalted Son of God, Who lives to forgive our sin. He gave Himself on the Cross willingly. It is seen in that phrase "gave Himself."

By the way, the word "gave" in the Greek indicates a once-and-for-all act. In the book of Hebrews, it says that He wouldn't be crucified over and over afresh. Rather, He gave Himself once and for all.

Jesus said it like this in John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Jesus laid down His life. He said, "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" or "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down willingly."

Philippians 2 is called by theologians "the gnosis passage" or "the emptying passage," where Paul says, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation"—or "emptied Himself." He didn't empty Himself of His deity, but He emptied Himself of His glory and majesty and splendor. He laid aside the splendor and glory of His deity. He came down to earth and robed Himself in humanity. "Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Jesus, because of love for lost sinners, gave Himself. That is why we should give ourselves in love to Jesus.

The second fact I want to point out in the text about the Cross of Christ is that the Cross was substitutionary. Number one, it was voluntary; Jesus gave Himself voluntarily and willingly out of love. Then, secondly, He was a substitute; He took our place. Go back to verse 4. Notice that He gave Himself "for our sins." There's a whole sermon in just that little phrase, "for our sins." We see why Jesus voluntarily gave Himself. It wasn't just to demonstrate His love—that indeed He did. In the Cross, we see the love of God and the grace of God and the mercy of God and the compassion of God and the kindness of God. Theologians talk about the "theater of the Cross." I love that concept. It means that the Cross is where you look to see all the attributes of God displayed. Certainly, we see the love of God and the grace of God and the

mercy of God, the power of God, the holiness of God and the justice of God and the righteousness of God.

But Jesus didn't die just to demonstrate His love and His attributes. He died primarily to pay for our sins. The reason the Cross is the centerpiece on God's table of time is because that is the way God redeems sinners. Fallen mankind is redeemed through the work of Jesus Christ upon the Cross. It says that He died for our sins or gave Himself up for our sins.

What do we mean by "sins"? Basically, sin entered the world through Adam and Eve. Sin brought death and sorrow and suffering. All of the pain, all of the sorrow, all of the suffering, all the heartache that we see in the world today is a result of man's sin. Adam and Eve sinned. They disobeyed God, which is the essence of sin. Sin is transgression or breaking God's law. God said, "Don't eat that fruit," but they ate that fruit. He said, "The day you eat that fruit, you will surely die." They became separated from God spiritually, and then they died physically. So death, sin, suffering, sorrow and decay all are a result of man's sin.

So Jesus came to pay the penalty for our sins. How? By His death. The Bible says, "The soul that sins shall surely die." "The wages of sin is death." And the thing that amazes me is that it is our sin, but it is His death. Why do I emphasize that? Because normally for your sin, you should die: "The soul that sins shall surely die." But in this case, it was our sin and His death. He paid a debt He didn't owe. We owed a debt we couldn't pay. So Jesus actually substituted Himself, out of love, voluntarily, to pay the debt of my sin.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul said, "For He made Him Who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." So Jesus, the sinless Son of God, became the sin bearer. He didn't become the sinner; He became the sin bearer. He was the pure, holy and sinless Son of God. Jesus didn't become a sinner, but He actually took our sins. He bore them. He was the sin bearer, the sacrifice.

Remember when Jesus hung on the Cross and He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" One of the deepest mysteries of the Cross is God forsaking God. How can this be? God the Father forsook God the Son. But even in the psalm that Jesus quoted, Psalm 22, He said, "But You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel." I believe that at that moment, because the sin of the world was being placed upon Christ, that God the Father, in some mysterious way that we could never fully know, understand or comprehend, and will take all eternity for it to be unfolded to us, turned His back on God the Son. Jesus was forsaken so that we would not have to be forsaken. He bore my sin so that I could be forgiven and I could be cleansed. He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Then at the end of the time that He was hanging on the Cross, He cried, "Tatelestai," or "It is finished" or "Paid in full." What that actually means is that all our sins have been paid for at the Cross of Jesus Christ. He was that substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for our sins.

His substitutionary suffering occurred only on the Cross. That's why John the Baptist said,

“Behold the Lamb of God Who takes away...”—or “carries away” or “bears away”—“...the sins of the world.” We must trust Jesus. Only He can save us.

So His death was voluntary, substitutionary, and thirdly, the Cross of Christ was a rescue mission. Paul makes it clear in this text that Jesus came to rescue us. Why did Jesus give Himself for our sins? Verse 4 says, “...that He might deliver us...”—or “rescue us”—“...from this present evil age”—or “world.” He even tells us why He came—to “rescue us”—and what He came to rescue us from—“this present evil world.” Salvation is a rescue mission undertaken for people living in the bondage of Satan’s kingdom.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, not only did they bring sin and death on the whole human race, but Satan became the god of this world. The Bible describes him as “the prince and the power of the air” or “the spirit that works in the children of disobedience.”

The “world” is referring to this sinful, wicked age of this world. It refers to the Greek word “aionios,” which means “age.” Paul is not talking about the physical world. He’s talking about the sinful, fallen world. He’s talking about the way the world lives and thinks and acts; the evil world’s system apart from God. This is why the Bible says, “Don’t be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This is why the Bible says, “Love not the world...”—the “aionios”—“...neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

So there are two kingdoms: the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. There is the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. When everyone is born the first time into this world, he is born into the first kingdom—the kingdom of Satan. That’s why Jesus said that “You must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God.” Through the Cross of Jesus Christ, we can receive new life and be translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and of love and of His own Son. When you were saved, you were taken out of bondage, and you were set free.

I love this expression that he uses here in the book of Galatians: “rescued us.” The word “rescue” literally means “to lift up and out of.” The very same Greek word is used in Matthew 5:29 where Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.” It’s the same word for “rescue.” In Acts 7:34, it is used concerning Israel being rescued from the bondage of Egypt. That’s a picture of our redemption.

When God brought the death angel in, they took the blood of the lamb and put it on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. And when that great Passover plague took place, and the angel came in and all the homes where the blood of the lamb was applied, the angel passed over them. There was also the sparing of the first-born son. All the homes of the Egyptians where the blood was not applied, death came to those homes.

So Jesus Christ is our Passover Lamb. His blood was shed on the Cross so that God’s wrath will pass over us, as it was poured out upon Jesus on the Cross, so that we can go out, so that

we can have the Exodus, so that we can have deliverance, so that we can be set free. It's the great deliverance.

The same word was used of Peter in Acts 12 when he was in prison, and God sent an angel to spring him out of jail. That's one of my favorite stories in the Bible. The angel came and sprung Peter out of jail and set him free. It's the same Greek phrase "rescued" him or "delivered" him, just as God rescued us, because we were in bondage to sin. We were enslaved, in chains, in the kingdom of darkness, and God in His grace came to us. He rescued us.

When you break the bread and drink the cup, let your heart be filled with gratitude. "Thank you, Lord, for rescuing me. Thank you, Lord, for reaching down and taking me out of darkness and taking me out of sin and taking me out of bondage and setting me free." How blessed it is to be redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. So we come to the Cross, and we are set free by His redemptive work.

This fourth fact about the Cross is that the Cross of Christ was planned by God the Father. Verse 4 says, "...according to the will of our God and Father." What was according to the will of our God and Father? Very simply, the death of Christ. Jesus gave Himself voluntarily, but God the Father had planned it and designed it before the foundation of the world, in eternity past. The Cross was not an afterthought with God.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, God did not say, "Oh, man! Now what am I going to do? I've got to figure this one out." Before He ever created man in the garden, He knew man would fall. God had a plan for man's redemption, and He designed it in such a way that God would get all the glory and all the praise for saving mankind. Jesus gave Himself, but the Father planned it.

Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane illustrates this. Remember when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane? One of my favorite things to do on the trip to Israel recently was to be in the Garden of Gethsemane. What an experience. I had the privilege of being able to open the Bible and teach the story of His agony in the garden. I was just so overwhelmed to think about the Son of God there in agony, prostrate on the ground, sweating, as it were, great drops of blood. When He prayed, He said, "Father, if it is Your will, let this cup pass from Me"—the cup of suffering, the sorrow, the sins of the world, being the sacrifice. "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from Me, but not My will, but Thine be done." The Cross was the Father's will. It was the Father's plan.

Again, I don't understand. It's hard for me to imagine giving your only son to die for the sins of mankind. But the Father designed it. The Father willed it. The Father planned it. The cup could not pass; Jesus had to drink it—our suffering, our sorrow, our pain. I never drink the communion cup but what I remember that He drank it for me. He suffered and died and took my pain, and He took my shame.

The whole plan of redemption is "according to the purpose of Him Who works all things

according to the counsel of His will,” says Paul in Ephesians 1:11.

Let me give you the fifth and last fact about the Cross. It's in verse 5. Paul says, “...to Whom.” That “to Whom” is a reference to “our God and Father” at the end of verse 4. So “according to the will of our God and Father” and it's “to Whom...”—as “our God and Father”—“...be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Theologians call this the “theocentric aspect” of salvation. I love that. What it means is that salvation is God centered, and it's God centered so that God gets all of the glory and God gets all of the praise. If you're saved by rites or rituals or by good works or good deeds, then it would be man centered. You would be praised. You would get glory. You would get credit. But thanks be to God that He has designed, through the Cross of Jesus Christ, that salvation is set up in such a way that God gets all the glory and that God gets all of the credit.

Grace and peace come to those who trust in Jesus, Who died on the Cross. Verse 3 says, “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved favor. Peace is the peace with God, salvation, and the peace of God is the sanctification of the believer. So we come to peace because of God's grace. It's never the opposite way—never peace then grace. First you experience God's grace, and then you experience God's peace.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” God has designed salvation to be by grace alone, in Christ alone, and salvation is for God's glory alone. Man can't take any credit. Man can't merit it. God saves us by His grace. All glory be to God.

So grace and peace come to you through the Cross of Jesus Christ. You come to the Cross, and God saves you by His grace. God keeps you by His grace. And when you're standing in God's grace, then you experience God's grace—peace with God and the peace of God ruling in your heart.

I love what Jonathan Edwards once said: “What begins with grace ends in glory.” I thought, How true that is. In verse 3, the beginning of the salutation, starts with “grace,” and in verse 5, it ends with “glory.” That's like our salvation. “What begins with grace ends in glory.”

This is why Paul said in Galatians 6:14, “But God forbid that I should boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live...I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” Salvation is all of God's grace, from beginning to end, and it's all for God's glory.

Someone put it in these words:

He saw me ruined in the Fall,

Yet loved me, notwithstanding all.

He saved me from my lost estate—

His loving kindness, oh, how great!

Let's pray.