

The Cross of Christ

Galatians 1:3-5

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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.”

Several months ago I came across these verses and was using it for a Good Friday service and could not pull myself away from this amazing text; that in Paul’s opening greeting or salutation, he would speak so eloquently and wonderfully and theologically about the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The Cross is central to Christianity. If you don’t understand the Person and work of Jesus Christ, you don’t understand Christianity. It is the message of the Gospel.

In verse 3, we have Paul’s desire for the Galatians—“grace...and peace”; in verse 4, we have Paul’s doctrine—Christ “gave Himself for our sins”; and in verse 5, we have Paul’s doxology —“to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

But why would Paul use the Cross to open and greet the believers in Galatia? Let me give you the reason and the background of Galatians. In the book of Galatians, Paul was writing to a group of churches in the area known as Galatia or modern-day Turkey. The believers in these churches were Gentile believers. But false teachers from Jerusalem had come into these churches and were telling these Gentile Christians that they could not be saved and go to heaven unless they became Jews. So they were proselytizing them into Judaism. Thus these false teachers were known as “Judaizers.”

The Judaizers said these Gentiles had to be circumcised, had to keep the Law of Moses, which meant to follow all the dietary laws and keep all the feast days and holy days. So they basically were telling the Galatians that it was not just by the grace of God, it was not just by believing in Jesus Christ that will save you; you must be Jewish in your religion. They were legalistic. So the Judaizers were teaching them that they must become Jewish in order to get to heaven, instead of just trusting in Jesus Christ.

So Paul starts off in his opening greeting with a clear affirmation of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His Person and His work and to why He came.

We must be right about our doctrine, of the Person and work of Jesus Christ. We understand that the cults and false religions are all wrong about who Jesus is and what He came to do. They don’t understand Christ or the Cross, and thus they are in error.

I want to give you five, important truths about the Cross of Jesus Christ. I want it to be simple—but not simplistic. I want to give you five statement of truth about the Cross of Jesus Christ,

from verses 4 and 5 of our text.

Number one, the Cross of Christ was a voluntary act. Verse 4 says, "...who gave Himself." Who is the "who" in this verse? Verse 3 says that it was "our Lord Jesus Christ." That is one of Paul's favorite statements about Jesus. He is our Lord, our Savior, our Jesus and He is Christ.

We need to understand who Jesus is, if we are going to understand what He did by His death on the Cross. Jesus is the Second Person of the Triune Godhead. In Christianity, we believe in one God—we're monotheistic—who is manifested in three Persons. It is called the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. So Jesus is God the Son. He is eternal just like the Father and the Spirit. He is omniscient just like the Father and the Spirit. All the attributes that the Father and the Spirit possess, Jesus, the Son of God, possesses. So He is eternal, omniscient or all-knowing, omnipresent, all-loving and self-existent. This is who Jesus is. There is a lot of confusion today about who Jesus is. He is our Lord, Jesus Christ.

In Philippians 2:6, it says that Jesus, "who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God." The word "form" here is the word "morphe" in the Greek. It doesn't mean shape or outward form but "essence." So Jesus, being in essence God, didn't think equality with God was something to hold onto. So He emptied Himself, or laid aside His majesty—not His deity; that's impossible for Him to do—and took on humanity in the form of a servant "and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

So who is Jesus Christ? Simply stated, He is God. He is the Second Person of the Godhead, coequal with the Father.

And what did Jesus do? He "gave Himself." That's past tense. It shows that the gift occurred once and for all at the Cross, and it can never be repeated. This is so important. Jesus died and He died for all. He will never have to die again—He cannot die again, because He is in an immortal body, was resurrected and ascended into heaven. So once and for all Christ sacrificed for us on the Cross.

So as we take the bread and drink the cup, let us remember that Jesus gave Himself voluntarily, willingly for us in death on the Cross.

He forever demonstrated His great love for us. The Cross is God the Father and Jesus Christ saying, "I love you." Also the Father "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). So the Father gave the Son, and the Son came and gave Himself voluntarily to die on the Cross.

Number two, the Cross of Christ was substitutionary. We see why Jesus gave Himself. Verse 4 says, "for our sins." There's the word "sin" in the Bible.

What is sin? There are different, Greek words that translate "sin" in the New Testament. One of them is the Greek word "hamartia," which means "to miss the mark." It's an archery term. It was used to refer to shooting an arrow at a target, but if you missed the target, you were a

hamartia or a sinner, because you missed the mark.

The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). So we all have missed the target; we've all sinned. And the Bible also teaches that we are sinners by birth as a result of the Fall of Adam. We are all born in Adam, separated from God, and thus are under condemnation.

When we are born and we grow, we sin and are sinners. So we are sinners at birth, inherited from Adam, and we are sinners by choice, which is a different concept of sin. That's willful, deliberate sin, which is translated in the New Testament as "transgression" or willfully disobeying God. We've all sinned or disobeyed God. And as a result, sin separates us from God.

The point I want to make in this statement "for our sins" is the doctrine of substitutionary atonement; that God, on the Cross, substituted Himself for us. The Bible teaches the self-substitution of God for us on the Cross.

Think about this: God was in Christ on the Cross reconciling the world to Himself. Someone said,

"He hung upon a cross of wood,

But He made the hill, on which it stood."

God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.

I have a quote from John Stott's book, *The Cross of Christ*. In his book, in speaking of the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death on the Cross, he said,

"The concept of substitution may be said then to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. God sacrifices Himself for man and puts Himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone. God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."

That's an amazing statement. Jesus actually substituted Himself voluntarily on the Cross to bear our sins. Do not miss the truth of the Bible; Jesus' death on the Cross was a substitutionary death. He died in my place.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was told to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him on a mountain. Abraham went and set Isaac on an altar, raised a knife and was going to plunge it into his son's chest, but God stopped him. God showed Abraham there was a ram caught in the bushes nearby. So Abraham took Isaac off the altar and placed the ram in the place of Isaac. That's a picture of what Jesus did for us; He's our Paschal, Passover Lamb.

Before the children of Israel came out of the Exodus in Egypt, they had to slay a lamb, take its blood and put it on the doorposts and lintels of their house. When the death angel came to Egypt, he passed over the homes where the blood was applied.

So Jesus died for us or took our place on the Cross. Isaiah 53:5 says, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities...and by His stripes we are healed.” And in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul says, “For He made Him sin who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

There is an important distinction here. Jesus did not become a sinner on the Cross; He became a sin-bearer on the Cross. He was the pure, holy, sinless Son of God. It was our sin; not His. It was all the sin of all humanity for all time—it’s hard to fathom—that He bore on the Cross.

You know how lousy you feel when you commit your own, private, little sin? Can you imagine having all the sin of all humanity of all time placed on you, laid on you?! It’s no wonder Jesus cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). He was forsaken so we wouldn’t be forsaken. He bore my sins so He could deliver me from its penalty. So Jesus came to die for our sins.

Number three, the Cross of Christ was a rescue mission. Verse 4 says that He came “that He might deliver us from this present evil age.” This is another reason why Jesus died on the Cross: to “deliver us.”

The word “deliver” means “to rescue” or literally “to pull out” or “to pluck out.” Jesus rescues us from “this present evil age.” In the Greek, the word “evil” is emphatic. If you’re a child of God, when you take communion, never forget how Christ came to rescue you, how Christ came to save you from sin.

There are three categories of sin that we are saved from. Number one, we are saved from sin’s penalty. This is called “justification.” It is the act of God whereby He declares a believing sinner to be righteous, based on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. So we don’t have to do penitence. We don’t have to pay for our sins. We don’t have to try to work for justification or earn it or merit it or deserve it.

“Jesus paid it all.

All to Him I owe.

Sin had left a crimson stain;

He washed it white as snow.”

Number two, we are saved from sin’s power. This is known as “sanctification.” In our position, or by justification, we are saved from the penalty of sin. But now in our practice, we can be

saved from the power of sin. We don't have to be slaves to sin any longer. This is a lifelong process. God, by His Spirit and through His Word, sanctifies us.

In justification, God declares you righteous positionally. In sanctification, He makes you righteous practically. You'll never fully arrive at a sinless state while in this world, but you should sin less and less as you walk with the Lord.

So He delivers us from sin's power. If you are under the power of some besetting sin today, Jesus Christ can set you free. He can set the captives free (Luke 4:18).

The third area in which we are rescued from sin is that we are saved from sin's presence. This is the category known as "glorification." So we are justified from sin's penalty, we are sanctified from sin's power and then we will be glorified from sin's presence. This means that when I die and go to heaven, there will be no sin there. Praise God! It means that when the Lord comes back and catches up the church "to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17), there will be no more sin, no more sickness, no more sorrow, no more tears. "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4).

This is the lot of the Christian: you have been rescued from sin's penalty, sin's power and one day from sin's presence altogether. We need to remember this when we take the bread and drink the cup at communion. Jesus came to rescue us from sin, and Jesus came to set us free.

And number four, the Cross of Christ was planned by God the Father. In verse 4 of our text, Paul says that it was all "according to the will of our God and Father." The Cross was not an afterthought with God.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God didn't freak out and say, "What am I going to do?!" He did go out looking for Adam after he sinned and God asked, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). But God knew where Adam was. You don't think God knew where Adam was? "I made him; now I lost him!" No. God wanted Adam to know where he was. "Adam, do you know that you're separated from me now? Adam, do you know that you've sinned, and that separates you from Me?" So God had a plan all the time. He had it all planned out.

Now we are all God's by creation, but we only belong to God if we are redeemed, through reconciliation and through regeneration or by being born again. Then we become the children of God. God will get greater glory for saving us, because He made us, we fell and then He redeemed us to Himself.

God planned this all out; it didn't catch Him by surprise. Ephesians 1:11 is where Paul, speaking of our redemption through the blood of Jesus' Cross, says that it was "according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will." So God's love planned the Cross, and God's Word prophesied the Cross.

The earliest prophecy we discover in the Bible goes all the way back to Genesis 3:15. Right after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God said the seed of the woman would bruise the

head of the serpent. It would bruise Satan's power and authority. In the Cross, Jesus destroyed his power and authority. The serpent would bruise His heel, but Jesus would bruise his head, speaking of the victory of Christ on the Cross, in His death, His Resurrection, His Ascension and in His exaltation.

When Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, He was praying and sweating "like great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44) as He was facing the Cross. He said, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup..." referring to the Cross "...away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). So indeed it was the will of the Father for the Son to go to the Cross to die for the sins of humanity. Then believers in Jesus Christ could be forgiven and set free from sin's power. God planned it and designed it according to His will.

William Newell wrote a hymn called At Calvary. The last stanza, one of my favorites, says:

"O, the love that drew salvation's plan!

O, the grace that brought it down to man!

O, the mighty gulf that God did span

At Calvary!"

God drew salvation's plan, and He brought it by His grace to man. How great is God's love in the Cross!

Number five, the Cross of Christ brings glory to God, verse 5. Paul says, "to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." How long should God get glory? "Forever and ever." So be it. And who is the "whom" in verse 5? Verse 4 says, "Father." The death of Jesus on the Cross brings glory to God the Father.

If you could work to get saved, if you could be good enough to get to heaven, that wouldn't bring glory to God.

Salvation isn't a joint thing. It's not the two of you working together; you do your part and God does His part. In Jonah 2:9, it says, "Salvation is of the Lord," from beginning to end.

You say, "Well, I had to believe; don't I get any credit?" No. If you're saved, all praise, all glory, all honor goes to God. You're not going to get to heaven and say, "Did you see me save myself?! I knocked on doors, I went to church, I read my Bible, I got baptized, I took communion Sunday morning at Revival! So I'm going to heaven!" No; there is no boasting, because it's all of God.

Now if you're lost and you don't go to heaven, but you go to hell, you have only yourself to blame. God has done everything He can do to save you from hell. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). So God, in love, gave His Son Jesus; and Jesus,

in love, gave Himself. And “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

So how marvelous to realize that all praise, all glory and all honor be to the Lord!

We all know Ephesians 2:8-9: “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.” And faith is not a work. No boasting; it’s all for the glory of God. Salvation by grace brings glory to God.

Is it any wonder that in Galatians 6:14, Paul says, “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And again, there is his term “Lord Jesus Christ.” In every chapter of Galatians, we have a reference to the Cross of Jesus Christ.

When we share communion, there are four directions that we will look toward. First, we look back at the Cross, which we just did, and we remember that Jesus gave Himself for our sins, and that He might rescue us from “this present evil age.” As a result, we’re going to give glory to God.

Second, we’re going to look within at our own sin, and you have to say, “Lord, forgive me.” So ask God to forgive you.

Then third, you look out toward others and forgive others their trespasses who have sinned against you. As you take communion, you have to be willing to forgive others.

The fourth look is to look ahead or look forward to the coming again of Jesus Christ.

So we look back at the Cross, we look within and confess our sin—“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9)—we look around at others—this is the important one we miss at communion. If you have hatred or unforgiveness or animosity in your heart toward anyone, you need to ask God to forgive you and to forgive them before you take communion.

Paul says that if we take communion in an unworthy manner, we despise the Cross (1 Corinthians 11:27). So how is it that we expect God to forgive us, if we cannot forgive others?

So when we take communion, we are saying, “God, I thank you for forgiving me, and I forgive those who have sinned against me.” Remember the Lord’s Prayer, which says, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

And lastly, we look ahead. Jesus said, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). So we are looking forward to Christ coming back, when we will drink with Him in His Father’s kingdom. So we look ahead.