

10. The Heart of the Cross

Texts: Gen. 18:22-33; Rom. 3:9-20; 5:12, 15, 18; 2 Cor. 5:14.

Quotes:

- The basis of your religion is injustice. The Son of God the pure, the immaculate, the innocent, is sacrificed for the guilty. This proves his heroism, but no more does away with man's sin than a school boy's volunteering to be flogged for another would exculpate a dunce from negligence. *Lord Byron*
- This is the day on which Christianity is defined: The day of the Cross. The day on which laments abound and hopes are assured...In the midst of what appears to be failure, God was performing a great injustice: to give us what we do not deserve and what we could not earn. *Foster McCurley*
- [Apart from the incarnation] the cross is nothing less than monumental injustice: Jesus is punished undeservingly by a God who is simply unfair. *Victor Shepherd*

Introductory questions

What really *is* the heart of the cross? It's most important to realize what went wrong—otherwise couldn't we misunderstand how God sets it right? Did God need to be changed by the cross? Did Jesus really have to die, and why? What are the questions the cross is answering? What about mercy and justice? How is the cross just?

Discussion ideas

The texts given for this week, especially 2 Cor. 5:14, refer to Christ dying for us. There are many such texts that state that Jesus died for sinful human beings. However the Bible nowhere elaborates a system, nor even uses the word "substitution." Scripture certainly does not place God in the role of Executioner of Jesus on the cross. Questions of right and justice surface here—for example as 12th century Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury: "For what justice is there in *his* [Jesus] suffering death for the sinner, who was the most just of all men? What man, if he condemned the innocent to free the guilty, would not himself be judged worthy of condemnation? And so the matter seems to return to the same incongruity which is mentioned above. For if he [God] could not save sinners in any other way than by condemning the just, where is his omnipotence? If, however, he could, but did not wish to, how shall we sustain his wisdom and justice? Boso to Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*, Book 1, Chapter VIII. Again, "How Christ's life is paid to God for the sins of men." XVIIIb. Intro. *Yet, never once does the Bible say that Jesus died for God. It is always that Jesus died for us.*

Sunday's lesson comments, "Though the Cross has stood at the center of the Christian faith, from the earliest days, up through today, debate has raged in the church over such basic questions as What happened at Calvary? Why did Jesus die? Did He have to die? What killed Christ? What did His death accomplish? Who was benefitted from His death?" Good questions.

How do you react to this statement in Thursday's lesson? "God wanted to forgive sinful humanity, but to do it in a just manner, one that would not condone sin or leave it unpunished. But how could He do that? Only one way: He poured out against Him—in the person of Jesus—His own righteous wrath against sin. In other words, because sin needed to be punished, *He punished it in Himself through Jesus at the cross.* That's what the Cross is all about: God taking upon Himself the punishment for our sins."

Ellen White Comments

Heavenly intelligences know that the cross is the great center of attraction. They know that it is through the cross that fallen man is to receive the atonement, and to be brought into unity with God. {TDG 51}

The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God. {Ed 263}

In the day of judgment, *when the death upon the cross is seen in all its meaning*, every voice will be hushed. Every one will see that Satan is a rebel, and will acknowledge God's wisdom, justice, and goodness; with one accord declaring, "Just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints." {ST, July 23, 1902} My emphasis.

Extra material

The whole idea of the transfer of punishment is problematic:

"I want to tell you a story." The minister smiled at his young congregation.

"It's about little Jack and a boy they called Big Tom. Now these two boys were in the same class at school. Jack was a short, thin little boy," (the smiling minister crouched down to demonstrate); "while Big Tom was a really big bully." (He stretched himself up as tall as he could and threw back his shoulders). "See!"

"Now there was a rule at school that all children caught thieving would be caned. Of course it's not very nice to be caned, is it children?" His eyes peered out, questioning.

"Of course not. But it's only fair. Now one day Jack forgot his lunch at home, so when it came time to eat he was very hungry. And when nobody was looking he grabbed Big Tom's lunch and ran off to hide and eat it. What a thing to do!" He paused for effect.

"Big Tom soon found out that his lunch was missing and went and told Teacher. Teacher went out looking and found little Jack eating Big Tom's lunch. So Teacher called the class together and told them that the thief had been found. Well, well."

By now the smile had gone, and the minister was looking very severe. His eyes swept the audience to make sure he had their full attention. He continued:

"Teacher asked Jack if he had anything to say before he was punished. But Jack knew he'd done wrong and shook his head. So Teacher went to the cupboard where the cane was kept and took it out. He made sure it was nice and whippy. Then he told Jack to bend over. There was no time for him to put books down his trousers or anything like that." The audience grinned feebly, eyes wide open.

"Then just before Teacher started, Big Tom stood up. 'Teacher', he said, 'Would it be alright if I took the punishment for Jack. See I'm much bigger and I don't want him to get hurt.' So Teacher agreed and soon Big Tom was bending over in Jack's place." The minister checked. The story was going well--they were all listening intently.

"Teacher lifted up his arm as high as he could and whipped the cane down. Boy, that really hurt. Teacher did it again, hard. Teacher needed to make sure the punishment hurt." He stopped to let the thought of pain sink in.

"Again and again the cane came swishing down, and Big Tom shouted in pain. But in the end it was over, and then little Jack came running up to Big Tom and said, 'Thank you, oh thank you for taking my punishment for me. I will love you forever and you will be my best friend'." The minister's smile returned.

"So you see children, that's what Jesus does for you. Isn't it marvellous that he takes our place and gets the punishment we deserve." He turned and sat down, another dramatic story told that made the point most effectively.

No, I'm not making all this up. I heard the story. But yes, I did wonder. Had he really said that Big Tom was a bully? How did that square with the nature of Jesus, I wondered. And what about Teacher, the thinly-disguised God the Father figure in the story? Making sure the punishment really hurt? Had he really meant that? God the Father heaping painful punishment on God the Son, and being glad about it? And what justice was there in the whole process? How could this be a description of the God who is truth and right?

My doubts grew as I thought it through. Jack only appreciated Big Tom because he'd escaped punishment. Is that to be our response to the God of love? Why had Big Tom acted in such an unpredictable way for a bully? What had been his motives for "standing in" for Jack. And all this over one lost lunch?

In the end I shuddered. For whatever "good" point had been put across must surely have been outweighed by the avalanche of bad. While the demonstration of Jesus' love is surely commendable, it must be rightly expressed. We must see why he did it. We must understand what the cross really says. And we must be very sure that in uplifting Jesus we are not at the same time denigrating the Father.

For is God really that sadistic Teacher figure, pouring out his wrathful punishment upon his Son? Is he determined to avenge himself by means of this Law enforcement? Is he willingly accepting the sufferings of the innocent as "payment" for the guilty?

Or are Father and Son united in their attitude of love towards us, nature and character one, working together for our salvation?

11. The Cross and Justification

Texts: Rom. 3:20, 28; 4:13; 5:14-18; 6:23; 8:33, 34; 9:31, 32; 2 Cor. 9:15; Gal. 2:16; 3:8-11; Eph. 2:7-9.

Quotes:

- Where the cross has been planted only superstitions have grown. *Lemuel K. Washburn*
- There have always been two kinds of Christianity—man’s and Christ’s. Does anyone today remember how the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion? It is said that he had a vision—saw a cross in the sky with the inscription, “In this sign shalt thou conquer.” He accepted the new faith promptly, because he thought it would defeat his enemies for him. That is man’s Christianity, a means to earthly triumph. *Joy Davidman*

Introductory questions

How are we “justified”? What does this really mean? What dangers are there in saying something is right when it’s really not? If we are only concerned with God’s verdict, what will this lead us to concentrate on? In terms of the great controversy, what went wrong and how does God set them right? How are we “justified by faith”?

Discussion ideas

Much of the discussion this week focuses on the term “to justify.” The conclusions drawn will be determined by what we think this word means. Recognizing that the word translated justice is the same as righteousness, and that to justify means to make right, what does God need to do to make things right?

Additionally, the making right is not just about us. Remember that the rebellion began in heaven, and was not primarily about keeping the law but concerned God’s trustworthiness and goodness in his government. Recall Satan’s charges. If God is going to fix all that, then the cross as the clearest demonstration of God needs to be doing more than just making our salvation possible.

Often we are told that justification is God “imputing” something to us, as if it were an object. But this misses the point. Righteousness is all about being and acting rightly. It is a relationship to truth, not a legal state. Nor is justification God saying we are right when we are not—it would not be helpful to do this in terms of the security of the universe, apart from being an untruth! The idea that God simply declares us righteous in spite of the evidence to the contrary would be the last way to settle the issues in the great controversy.

The lesson explains it this way (Wednesday): “Not only did He die as our substitute, paying the penalty for our sins, but the Lord offers to all who will claim it the perfect righteousness of Jesus in place of each person’s sinful record. This is the wonderful provision of the plan of salvation: Not only are our sins forgiven, but the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us as if it were our own!” Now if you were the Accuser, how would you react to such a process? Would it answer your charge that God acts unfairly?

Much of the language used—credited, imputed, payment, accounted, exchange—sounds like that of an accountant (with all due respect to accountants!). Is that what God is trying to do—balance the books? Also, if as the lesson states, justification is only a legal declaration, how does this solve the sin issue in the universe? Is there not more to it than this?

Ellen White Comments

The atonement of Christ was not made in order to induce God to love those whom He otherwise hated; and it was not made to produce a love that was not in existence; but it was made as a manifestation of the love that was already in God's heart, an exponent of the divine favor in the sight of heavenly intelligences, in the sight of worlds unfallen, and in the sight of a fallen race. . . . We are not to entertain the idea that God loves us because Christ has died for us, but that He so loved us that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for us. {ST, May 30, 1895}

Jesus came to teach men of the Father, to correctly represent him before the fallen children of earth. Angels could not fully portray the character of God, but Christ, who was a living impersonation of God, could not fail to accomplish the work. The only way in which he could set and keep men right was to make himself visible and familiar to their eyes. That men might have salvation he came directly to man, and became a partaker of his nature.... Christ exalted the character of God, attributing to him the praise, and giving to him the credit, of the whole purpose of his own mission on earth,—to set men right through the revelation of God.... When the object of his mission was attained,—the revelation of God to the world,—the Son of God announced that his work was accomplished, and that the character of the Father was made manifest to men. {ST, January 20, 1890}

Extra Material

Let's analyze from Scripture what the cross accomplished. For it is easy to read into the texts our preconceptions, rather than put all the Biblical material together and allow it to speak for itself. Jesus' death brought about:

- “reconciliation” (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:13-18; Col. 1:20,22; 1 Pet. 3:18b)
- “redemption” (Rom. 3:24; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7a; Col. 2:14-15; Titus 2:14a; Heb. 2:14-15; 9:12; 1 Pet. 1:18-19)
- “righting” the wrong (Rom. 4:25; 5:9; Gal. 2:21)
- “forgiveness” (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 7:26-27; 9:25-28; 1 Pet. 2:24)
- “making pure and holy” (Eph. 5:25; Col. 1:22b; Titus 2:14b; Heb. 13:11; 1 John 1:7)
- “healing” (1 Pet. 2:24)
- “rescue, salvation” (1 Co. 1:18; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 2:14-15)

Who did Jesus die for?

- “the ungodly, the powerless, sinners, the unrighteous” (Rom. 5:6-8; 1 Pet. 3:18)
- “us, us all” (Rom. 5:8; 8:32; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 5:2; Titus 2:14; 1 John 2:2)
- “all” (2 Co. 5:14-15; Col. 1:20; Heb. 7:27)
- “the whole world” (1 John 2:2)
- “Jews and Gentiles” (Eph. 2:13-18)
- “you” (Col. 1:19-23)
- “every person” (Heb. 2:9)
- “the Church” (Eph. 5:25-27)
- “many” (Heb. 9:28)
- “me” (Gal. 2:20)

12. The Cross and Sanctification

Texts: Rom. 6:1-16, 1 Cor. 6:11, Gal. 5:16-25, Col. 3:1-4.

Quotes:

- The Christian is the real radical of our generation, for he stands against the monolithic, modern concept of truth as relative. But too often, instead of being the radical, standing against the shifting sands of relativism, he subsides into merely maintaining the status quo. If it is true that evil is evil, that God hates it to the point of the cross, and that there is a moral law fixed in what God is in Himself, then Christians should be the first into the field against what is wrong. *Francis A. Schaeffer*
- It was the experience of the disciples who knew Jesus both before and after the Resurrection, and the conviction which they communicated to others, that laid the foundation of faith. This faith, once given, proved to be—like the Person who gave rise to it—essentially self-authenticating. And ever since, the Church has looked to the Cross, a symbol of weakness, as its unique source of power in preaching the Gospel, its authority both to teach and to preach has been of this kind. *Nick Earle*

Introductory questions

What does it mean to become sanctified? Would the average person understand that term? How should we express what the cross of Jesus does for us in our lives today? How does the way we live reflect our inner values and convictions? If we are a spectacle to the universe, how do our concepts of the cross affect our witness?

Discussion ideas

Perhaps a better term than “sanctification” would be “living in Christ.” That’s certainly what the Scriptural texts for study this week are all about. Because of all the theological baggage that all too often pervades our understanding of the cross, we need to look again at what Jesus is demonstrating there. Is it an example what we too can accomplish? Or is it rather the ideal desire of God that we should operate according to his values and principles, not seeking ourselves, but living always for the other...

The concept of the “Way of the Cross” can often become a melodramatic image that exalts the “benefits” of suffering. [For example, what is the prime message of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Christ*?] While Jesus does say we all need to pick up our own cross, and surely there is much suffering in this life, does this mean that we should desire to emulate the experience of Jesus? Certainly many of the early martyrs thought so. But this can also be a trap in which the pain of suffering is seen as the earning of credit, or the bearing of punishment for some sin. The Jews of Jesus’ time wrongly equated suffering and sin—could we end up doing the same?

Once again we need the great controversy perspective. The cross, vital as it is in our own experience and God’s means of our salvation, has a far wider and larger message. It is God’s testament to the whole universe as to the truth of his nature and character, his way of setting right what has gone wrong in his universe, his answers to the charges at the heart of the rebellion.

Some have stated that we all need our own crucifixion experience. But this is to denigrate the action of Jesus for us. He has revealed what sin does to us—we do not need to replicate it. Monday’s lesson affirms “sanctification is something bestowed by a holy God; it’s something that God Himself does, either to a person or to a thing.” So what do *we* do?

Ellen White Comments on being kept right

As students, you are ever to be learning in the school of Christ; you are to bring your entrusted capital of physical and mental energy into your work... Nothing less than the power of God will make and keep you right. You are to offer to God nothing less than your best. {CM 31}

As I realize how much has been done for us to keep us right, I am led to exclaim, Oh, what love, what wondrous love, hath the Son of God for us poor sinners! Should we be stupid and careless while everything is being done for our salvation that can be done? All heaven is interested for us. We should be alive and awake to honor, glorify, and adore the high and lofty One. Our hearts should flow out in love and gratitude to Him who has been so full of love and compassion to us. With our lives we should honor Him, and with pure and holy conversation show that we are born from above, that this world is not our home, but that we are pilgrims and strangers here, traveling to a better country. {EW 113}

Spiritual life must be sustained by communion with Christ through His Word. The mind must dwell upon it, the heart must be filled with it. The Word of God laid up in the heart and sacredly cherished and obeyed, through the power of the grace of Christ can make man right, and keep him right. {AG 228}

By His Holy Spirit the Lord will demonstrate that His word is the only thing that can make men right and keep them right. I have been shown that God's revealed truth alone can keep men in the path of humble obedience. {11MR 91}

The Bible, the Bible alone, laid up in the heart and blessed by the Spirit of God, can make man right and keep him right. {1888 194}

Extra material

“A book is put into our hands when children, called the Bible, the purport of whose history is briefly this: That God made the earth in six days and there planted a delightful garden, in which He placed the first pair of human beings. In the midst of the garden He planted a tree, whose fruit, although within their reach, they were forbidden to touch. That the Devil, in the shape of a snake, persuaded them to eat of this fruit; in consequence of which God condemned both of them and their posterity yet unborn to satisfy His justice by their eternal misery. That, 4000 years after these events (the human race in the meantime having gone unredeemed to perdition), God engendered with the betrothed wife of a carpenter in Judaea (whose virginity was nevertheless uninjured), and begat a son, whose name was Jesus Christ; and who was crucified and died in order that no more men might be devoted to hell-fire.... The book states, in addition, that the soul of whoever disbelieves this sacrifice will be burned with everlasting fire.” *Percy Bysshe Shelley*

The lesson (11, Friday) includes the following illustration. In the light of the above (mis)understanding of what the Bible teaches, does this kind of thinking help or hinder in our witness to the world?

“Imagine being in a school in which there are only two grades, pass and, and the only way to get the passing grade is to have a perfect score on every test, every quiz, every time. Even one question wrong on any text, and you get the same failing grade as someone who got every question wrong on every test. It makes no difference: If you get all the questions wrong or only one wrong, you still fail. How, in a sense, does this analogy help us understand why, as sinners, we need the righteousness of Jesus (who was the only person ever to get *every* question right on *every* test) credited to us in order for us to be just before God?”

13. The Cross and the Great Controversy

Texts: Job 1, 2, 42; Isa. 53:4; Matt. 4:1; John 12:31-33; 1 Pet. 5:8, 9; Rev. 5:11-14; 12:7-19.

Quote: Some try to interpret the plan of salvation in a very legal way suggesting that what has gone wrong is that we have broken the rules. And the law demands that God execute us for breaking the rules. But Jesus died so that somehow God could justly forgive us even though we have broken the rules. How can you claim that justice has been done when the most righteous and innocent Man who has ever lived dies so that all the guilty can go free? *A. Graham Maxwell*

Introductory questions

What has the cross to do with the great controversy? Isn't it all about how God fixes our salvation? What is the difference between the "cosmic conflict" and a general recognition of the battle between good and evil? How can we even misunderstand what the great controversy is all about? What *does* God want us to understand from the cross?

Discussion ideas

The lesson (Sabbath afternoon) discussion on the great controversy impact of the cross is an interesting starter. It is important to recognize that the sinless beings of the Universe needed the demonstration of the cross—that there are issues way beyond our little world is a vital perspective. The lesson also asks what are the issues in the great controversy.

This is an essential question, for the answers of the cross depend on what you believe are the issues. If it is a question over power, then the cross is seen in that way. If it is about legality, then that's the way you understand the cross. If it is an issue of trustworthiness, then the cross will be the answer to that. Of course, not all the issues are valid, and consequently some answers will be wrong. That's why it is critical to look again at what the Devil's charges were.

Monday's lesson affirms "The Creator took upon Himself our humanity so that His life—more than equal to lives of created beings—would atone for the sins of all humanity." How do you react to this comment? What does the concept of balancing out sins reflect?

John 12:32 identifies exactly what Jesus was doing. His death on the cross draws—not just us, but the whole onlooking universe. Why? Because we all need to see and know and understand the truth about God in contrast to the Devil's misrepresentation. Only through the demonstration of God as he is are we drawn to accept God, and only then can we accept the salvation he has to offer. Unfortunately, however much we might want salvation, if we do not see God in a positive light then we will not want to accept eternal life with such a God. That's why the cross is so important—far more than fixing our salvation or adjusting our legal status, God is winning us back to loving trust, healing us from the damage on sin, and fitting us for an eternity in the presence of our loving Lord. Otherwise the cross doesn't make any sense!

While we cannot minimize the suffering Jesus experienced on the cross, nor must we elevate this aspect and say this is what the cross was *for*. The over-concentration on the passion, the "atoning suffering" if you will, makes it appear that Jesus through his agony is satisfying something in God. If that is what God appears to be requiring, are we not buying into the Devil's picture of God? As Ellen White writes, "It was not the pain and ignominy of the cross that caused His inexpressible agony. Christ was the prince of sufferers; but His suffering was from a sense of the malignity of sin..." {DA 752}. Nor did God the Father cause this. For "God suffered with His Son." {DA 693.2} God is on the cross, showing his love for the Universe, *for us*.

Ellen White Comments

God so loved the world that He gave Himself in Christ to the world to bear the penalty of man's transgression. God suffered with His Son, as the divine Being alone could suffer, in order that the world might become reconciled to Him. {AG 161}

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." God suffered with His Son, in the agony of Gethsemane, the death of Calvary; the heart of Infinite Love paid the price of our redemption--The Home Missionary, April, 1893. {7ABC 472.5}

Having made the decision and reached the final crisis, he [Jesus] fell in a dying condition to the earth from which he had partially risen. Where now were his disciples, to place their hands tenderly beneath the head of their fainting Master, and bathe that brow, marred indeed more than the sons of men? The Saviour trod the winepress alone, and of all the people there was none with him. And yet he was not alone. He had said, "I and my Father are one." God suffered with his Son. Man cannot comprehend the sacrifice made by the infinite God in giving up his Son to reproach, agony, and death. This is the evidence of the Father's boundless love to man. {3SP 100}

We are to rejoice that the atonement is complete; and believing in Christ as our complete Saviour, we may know that the Father loves us, even as He loves His Son. Ellen White, Review and Herald, Nov. 11, 1890.

Extra material

"God's problem in the Great Controversy is not legality but doubt about His reputation and trustworthiness resulting in broken relationships. God must end the alienation, rebellion, discord, suspicion, and distrust by restoring our trust in Him.

"This view of the atonement is modeled on servant-leadership with distributive justice as the governing principle via the law of cause and effect. Sin is inherently destructive, therefore one avoids sin for fear of its natural consequences. God's law is descriptive. God describes the way those in harmony with Him will live and the natural consequences that occur when we refuse His ways or behave destructively. God's justice requires that men shall have the light of truth that through being won to love and trust Him they will accept the forgiveness and healing that breaks the chain of natural consequences that leads to ruin and death. Instead of punishing sin to show that it is sinful, God attempts to protect sinners from the full consequences of sin that they might have opportunity to know Him for who He is and so be won to trust Him. Instead of feeling that sin is an offence to his authority and sovereignty, God feels pained that His children would destroy themselves for lack of responding to a right knowledge of Him. His wrath as described in Romans 1 and Hosea 11 is giving up in loving disappointment those who refuse to receive Him, letting them go to the horrible natural cause-effect consequences of a life apart from Him. The hopeful candidate for salvation naturally becomes preoccupied with "how can I better understand the One who so loves that my love and trust may be strengthened in the God who will save all who trust Him."

"Here, the atonement is God's means of confirming grace. Christ must reveal in full clarity God's winning ways that there may be no doubt about the trustworthiness of the servant-leader of the universe. Jesus suffered the heart-wrenching separation sin causes, dying of a broken heart, dying as all God's rebelling creatures will, destroyed by sin's consequences, not God's punishment. God thereby secures the loyalty of His children throughout the universe and confirms his right to forgive and justify (set right) all who trust Him. Thus He brings the rebel back into harmony with Him and His cause-effect law.

"Instead of being a self-contained doctrine, this view of the atonement provides a comprehensive context for all the doctrines. The central theme of the atonement is the character of God. All the doctrines, rightly understood, are windows on His character. They thus reinforce our trust and love in Him through their contribution to our understanding of His character. Thus each doctrine brings something significant to our understanding of the central theme of the atonement. So the cross is threaded throughout all that we teach." Glenn Ruminson, *"The Atonement and the Adventist Challenge."*