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Lift High the Cross

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Isaiah 53:1-6 (ESV)

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

John 19:28-37

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

This sign of the fish that the early Christians used to identify each other as Christians is still a very common sign in the world today. One of the most well-known religious signs in the world, the sign of the fish is seen on the back of many cars, many posters, and many plaques in homes. It is known as the Ichthus.

The Ichthus is actually a Greek word that means "fish," and that word itself comes from the Greek words that describe Jesus: "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." The first letter in each of those Greek words forms the word "fish." That is where this emblem came from, and it was a way for early Christians to identify themselves in a hostile culture—a culture that was hostile to believers in Christ.

This is, again, evidence that we are living in a spiritual battle, in which the forces of evil oppose the forces of good and the forces of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Even today, many Christians around the world must be in hiding and quietly identify themselves as safe persons to be with. In the United States, we do not have this problem as much because of the freedom of religion that we enjoy.

This identifier of Christians throughout the world gave way to a different symbol around 400 A.D. This shift occurred when Constantine took power in Rome and made Christianity the national religion to unify his people. At that point, he began to elevate Christianity, and it was no longer looked down upon but celebrated. This is when the cross became the most recognized religious symbol in the world.

We can understand why the early Christians might not have used the cross initially. To them, the cross was grotesque—it was a form of capital punishment. The word "excruciating" comes from "crucifix," some 1,400 years later, to describe the enormous pain experienced on the cross. The word then came to describe other excruciating experiences in life.

To raise the cross in the early days seemed ridiculous to the followers of Christ because many of them were crucified. Historians tell us that, at times, as one entered the capital city of Rome, there would be 200 to 300 Christians crucified along the road as a statement to discourage others from worshipping any god other than the great Roman Empire. Yet, over time, the cross has become the most recognized symbol in the world.

People wear it on their bodies—many as tattoos or necklaces. We hang it in our homes. The cross is exalted on buildings across the country, including temples and cathedrals. The cross is held up so high, yet it remains a symbol of death, suffering, and punishment.

Interestingly, a friend of mine who wears a cross once had a conversation with a Satanist who asked, "Why do you wear a cross? Why don't you wear an electric chair or a syringe for lethal injection?" The Satanist pointed out that the cross is similar to those execution tools. Yet, we continue to lift up this symbol. Why? Because we are celebrating Jesus' death.

As we head toward Easter, Ash Wednesday, and the Lenten season, we focus on Jesus' death in our Bible overview. Why do we emphasize His death so much? I want to give you three reasons. There are literally hundreds of reasons we celebrate the cross, but at the core, I believe the cross addresses our greatest problem in life.

Yesterday, I was driving home from Clinton, Iowa, where I was leading a workshop. As I drove, I turned on the news for a bit. If you were to just listen to the news, you might think that our greatest problems today are political in nature. There is a heavy focus on political issues in our world. Of course,

Jesus said, "In this world, you will have trouble," which includes political trouble. We have had political trouble for centuries and will continue to have it.

But politics is not the root of our problems, even though many people believe that solving political issues would solve everything. According to Scripture, political issues are merely a symptom of a deeper problem.

As a Bible teacher, I am here simply to teach what Scripture says. Our root problems are not political, nor are they economic. If you listen to the news, you might think the greatest issue is the global economy—understanding money, the exchange of value, fiat currency, trust in financial systems, tariffs, world trade, Wall Street, and so on. Many believe that if we could solve economic issues, we would fix our world. But according to Scripture, economic problems are just another symptom of the deeper issue.

Some might think our greatest problems are social in nature. We have divisions, prejudice, and different perspectives on groups of people. The way we treat and mistreat one another is a major issue in our world. Some believe that if we could just treat each other better—if we could love and accept one another—our problems would be solved.

All of these challenges—political, economic, and social—stir up deep emotions. Yet, according to the Scriptures, they are all symptoms of the real, underlying problem. And we have emotional struggles. We have anxiety, worry, fear, and bitterness that can take root in our hearts. These emotions defile the world, the Bible says, but they are not the root of the problem. If you trace the issue back further—from the macro to the micro—you arrive at the way people think. We have mental struggles and intellectual problems in our world. Then, if you consider the bodies we live in, we face disease and sickness. If we could just solve all of these issues, our world would be a much better place. But the Bible says no. These are all symptoms of a root problem, and unless the root is dealt with, none of these issues will be truly resolved.

Paul identifies the root with one word in Romans 5:12: "Sin entered the world through one man." He identifies the root as sin. Way back in the beginning, sin entered through the first man, and then death came through sin. In this way, death came to all people, because now all of us sin. We lift up the cross because it addresses the root of the human issue—the root of our problem in the world.

So, what is the definition of sin? If Paul says this is it, and if the Bible—God's inspired word—is telling us this, what does it mean? Sin is an archery term that describes the act of shooting an arrow toward a bull's-eye and missing the mark. In a spiritual sense, sin is missing the mark of God's standards for our lives. The Bible describes sin as a transgression against God's law, as missing God's expectations, and as rebellion against Him. Paul wrote in Romans 6 that all of us fall short of God's intention—His glory—for us. In a broad sense, sin is defined as an offense against divine moral law—an action, thought, or word that violates one of God's commandments.

During our time of confession earlier, we acknowledged this: We admit to God that we have sinned against Him, against His ways, and against His standards in thought, word, and deed—by what we have done and by what we have left undone. To deal with the problem, you have to admit that it exists. This is the issue in our world today—many do not want to acknowledge sin. But God makes it very clear that

we are sinful. The gospel writer John stated, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar, and His truth is not in us."

So, we have this root problem, and we celebrate the cross because it addresses that root issue. But the cross does more than that—it not only deals with sinful behaviors but also with the power that drives sin in humanity. We sin because there is a propensity to sin inside of us.

King David, after breaking one of God's commandments, felt conviction. He knew he was wrong before a holy God. This was a great revelation. In Psalm 51, he wrote, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David was speaking not only of behaviors and thoughts but also of the power inside of us that drives us to fall short of God's intent. The power within us rebels against the holiness and purity of God.

Paul described this struggle within himself: "We know that God's ways are holy, but I am not. I have been sold as a slave to sin. I don't understand what I do. I don't do what I want to do. Instead, the very things that I want to do, I don't do. Who is doing this in me?"

The Bible describes our sinful nature as having a three-pronged motor that fuels our tendencies. John identifies three specific aspects:

1. **The Lust of the Flesh** – The desire for pleasure and comfort. While God has given us the capacity to experience pleasure, when we seek it outside of His standards, it leads us away from His intent and down a path of decay and separation from Him. In love, He warns us about the lust of the flesh, which tempts us to fulfill our desires in ways that violate His ways.
2. **The Lust of the Eyes** – Our eyes can see things that stir discontent within us and drive us to pursue immoral actions to obtain what we see. The lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh often work together, leading us into temptation and sin.
3. **The Pride of Life** – The ego within us. Instead of being selfless, we become selfish, wanting the world to revolve around us. This pride fuels a sense of entitlement and independence from God.

Paul says this nature within us causes us to do things we know we should not do while preventing us from doing what we know we should. Have you ever experienced this struggle in your life? I know I have.

For example, I try to eat healthily and take care of my body. But sometimes, when I come home and my wife has baked something unhealthy, I tell myself, "Do the right thing. Eat for life. Eat for health." But as I walk through the kitchen, my eyes see what she has made, and my flesh starts speaking to me about how good it would taste. The very thing I don't want to do, I end up doing. And this has happened more than once. Why? Because there is a part of me that, even though it wants to do what is right, struggles to do it.

The cross came to deal with this—not just the outward behaviors but the inner power and drive that push us toward sin. The cross addresses our deepest need, transforming not just what we do but who we are at the core.

And then thirdly, the cross came to deal with the consequences of this. It deals with sin's ultimate consequence. God said to Adam that if he were to disobey His ways, His law—and He only gave him one law, which was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—he would surely die.

Now, this word "die" is nuanced here. There is an invisible death—a spiritual death—that occurs when we are separated from God. And then there is a physical death in our world, where things are decaying and dying. Sin has brought both into the world: spiritual death and separation from God, and also the beginning of death itself when we rebelled against God. Death entered our world because sin came into the world through one man, and so death came through sin. Because all have sinned, death comes to all people.

Then we see God looking over humanity with this reality, saying, "I love them. I love them." So what does He do? Paul says it this way, in revelation in his spirit: "What a miserable person I am." If our world were to stop looking outward at one another and instead look into the mirror of Scripture, allowing it to teach us the truth about ourselves, we would begin to solve the problem more effectively than by blaming external circumstances. The politics, the economics—at the root of all these things is the human heart. Paul expresses this so clearly: "Who will save me from this problem?" And then he answers, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us the victory."

That is why we celebrate the cross. Because Jesus Christ—"For God so loved the world, He sent His one and only Son." Jesus Christ did not consider His equality with God—He, who was there from all eternity, part of the Triune Godhead—the Elohimi. Instead, He humbled Himself, made Himself nothing, took on the nature of a servant, was found in human likeness, and in appearance as a man. He became obedient to His Father in heaven, even to the point of death on a cross. Why? To save you and me from the consequences of our sin, the power of our sin, and the justice due to us for our sin. This is why we lift up the cross.

When Jesus was hanging there on that cross, as we read in Isaiah, "He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that would bring us peace was upon Him. By His wounds, we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to our own way. But the Lord has taken our iniquity deep within our hearts and laid it on Him." That is applied to us by faith. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree," solving the root problem of humanity.

The only question is: Are we going to let Him have His way in us as He calls us to Himself? Are we going to allow Him to do His work in us, helping us to understand what is called substitutionary atonement—the atonement of Christ?

God has given us two activities or rituals that we refer to as sacraments. One of them is baptism. Baptism is something taught to us in the New Testament Scriptures. Last week, I had the opportunity to

baptize a young lady. Here, when we baptize, we pour some water on a person's head as a sign of them being washed—symbolically—by the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from our sins. So, when we place water on someone, it symbolizes them being washed internally by the blood of Christ.

This past summer, I had the opportunity to baptize my son. We were out in a lake, and one morning he asked me, "Dad, could I get baptized?" So we walked out into the water. The act of baptism is a symbol of being buried with Christ. When a person is submerged, it represents their old nature being buried with Christ, crucified with Him, absorbed by Jesus. And when they come up out of the water, it signifies new life with Christ. God has given us this as a powerful symbol of His work in our hearts through the cross, which is applied to us by faith.

"All of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into His death. We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will also be united with Him in His resurrection." That is where we are going next week. "For we know that our old self was crucified with Him, so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin."

We have baptism as a sacrament, and then we have communion. Communion serves as a reminder, just as Jesus instructed: "As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of Me." During His time of communion, He took bread, broke it, and said, "This is My body, broken for you." Then, He took the cup and said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, shed for the forgiveness of your sins." We partake in communion to honor Him.

The cross gets to the root of the human problem, which is in our hearts. If we were to allow God to do His purifying and cleansing work within us, we would have far fewer problems in the world around us. And it is not just for us—God desires the whole world to know that He gave His Son.

This is our hope. This is the hope of humanity: God working in the hearts of men and women, bringing the truth of His gospel, which sets people free from sin and death. And one day, as this transformative process continues in our world, Jesus will return and execute all of this in a beautiful and glorious way. We long for that day. But until then, He has invited us to continue growing in Him, reminding ourselves of these truths, and allowing ourselves to be transformed from the inside out.

Let's pray together:

Father, we thank You for Your Word, which teaches us so clearly what to believe and how to live. We thank You that You have made it clear to us our state before You.

Father, I am mindful that there may be some here today who have not yet opened their hearts to You, who have not fully understood the work of the cross and their need for it. Maybe today, for the first time, they are beginning to grasp it. Perhaps Your Spirit is inviting them now to open their hearts to the gift of Jesus—to place their faith in Him and receive the forgiveness of sins through His work on the cross, the gift of eternal life that He purchased by paying the penalty for their sins.

Father, continue to teach us these truths so that we may live in the new life You have offered to us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.