

THE WAY IT HAD TO BE

12 daily devotions on the Cross of Christ

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Preface

As the title of this book declares, its subject is something that was not only essential but also which was certain to take place, something that 'had to be.' It's theme is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Malcolm Ryan, in his usually warm manner, takes us through the various stages that brought Jesus to the cross, and finally his triumphant resurrection from the dead. We are given glimpses of the way people alive at the time reacted to Jesus while he was on earth, but over and above that the mighty hand of God is seen planning, controlling and completing all that took place. It was the unfolding of his eternal purpose to save a people for himself.

Questions such as, 'Why did Jesus come to earth?' and, 'Why did Jesus have to die?' and, 'Was this a great failure in his ministry?' are touched on very helpfully. As we are taken through various Bible passages, we see the amazing grace of God at work in all that Christ achieved by his life, death and glorious resurrection. The inevitable conclusion has to be that the love of God, which caused him to send his own dear Son so that he would die for unworthy yet desperately needy sinners, has to be infinite, beyond measure. It is amazing!

The book is intended to be used as a daily reading guide for 12 days, reading one chapter each day. Although it majors around the events of Easter it can be read at any time of the year. You will see a Bible reading is suggested at the beginning of each section, and we recommend that you prayerfully read those verses first and then read the relevant chapter. As you read seek the help of the Holy Spirit. Ask God that he might be your teacher, and that he will enable you to understand in a personal way the significance of all that Jesus accomplished.

Derek French, 2003

Introduction

Out of all the forms of execution invented by men, the cross has been one of the worst. Much favoured by the Romans, it was an exceptionally cruel means of putting people to death. And if you were to read the biography of someone like the Emperor Nero, you would see how very common crucifixions once were. On one occasion hundreds of mutinous slaves were crucified along the very

road they had refused to build. But what is really significant for us is that it was also upon the cross that the Lord Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for sin.

Sin? That's right, and we have all sinned. *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"* Romans 3:23 tells us. Sin has to do with trying to keep God out of our lives, and down through the centuries the cross has condemned the resulting self-indulgence and lusts of people. It has judged their pride, hate and greed. In return it has provoked scorn and aroused antagonism. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:23), *"We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."* And today people still stumble over the message of the cross.

Some reckon there is no need for a Saviour; they don't see the reality of sin in their lives. Others think it is a "do-it-yourself" job to reach a standard that is acceptable to God, so they hop onto the religious treadmill. Then there are those who like to think God is much too nice to punish them for their wrongdoings.

But the cross just keeps on saying, "You are sinners."

Oh, and never mind about the popular opinion that claims there are lots of ways to get right with God. That is one of the devil's lies. The only way is through Christ and him alone. As Jesus said (John 14:6), *"I am the way and the truth and the life."*

Now I'd better explain why ...

Malcolm Ryan

P.S. If you have a bible handy, don't forget the "suggested reading" each day. It'll help you understand that little bit more!

Day 1: The rejected stone John 19: 16-30

The mission of the Lord Jesus at his first coming was to pay sin's penalty, so he knew that his public ministry would have its conclusion at the cross.

Christ gave an early hint of what was going to happen at the wedding at Cana, when his mother asked him to turn water into wine. In saying to her (John 2:4), *"My time has not yet come,"* he was in fact referring to the crucifixion. Then there was the occasion when the disciples urged him to eat something. He told them (John 4:34), *"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."*

That he had to suffer and die was the way it had to be; no one can overturn the eternal purposes of the sovereign God. Later, while in controversy with his enemies, Jesus said (John 5:21), *"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it."* He had the power to give life to the dead ... and he said this as he looked ahead to his victory over sin and death.

The cross, you see, wasn't some kind of back-up plan to be put into action if all else failed. God wasn't exactly taken by surprise when Adam sinned! When all is said and done, God is God. And what would happen at Calvary was not only in his will, it had been planned before the creation of the world.

Now the Lord Jesus wasn't at all popular with the religious leaders. For one thing, he identified himself with ordinary people ... the very folk they had written off. And in Matthew, chapter 21, Jesus had something to say to the religious leaders about the purpose of his ministry. Much to their displeasure, he used a parable together with the prophecy of Psalm 118 to tell them why he was here.

In this parable, there is a vineyard. This represents the nation of Israel, whose owner is God (Isaiah 5:1-7). There are also some wicked tenants – men entrusted with spiritual leadership, but who have already abused God's prophets. And in telling the parable, Jesus says (Matthew 21:37-42), *"Last of all, [the vineyard owner] sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

"'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,' [his listeners] replied, 'and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.'

"Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes"?"

Quoting from the 118th Psalm, Jesus was showing himself to be both the rejected Son and the rejected stone. Rejected, as he would be, by the religious leaders of Israel

and eventually by the nation itself. Rejected with the shouts of "Crucify, crucify." But although the Lord Jesus would die, he wouldn't stay dead. Christ crucified would rise in triumph and become the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

As Peter declared in Jerusalem, standing before the religious leaders shortly after Pentecost (Acts 4:10-11), *"... Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead ... He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'" To say that was like calling down a lightning shaft on these people! They had no place for the Lord Jesus in their scheme of things; yet he is the indispensable stone ... the one who completes the structure. He is the one we cannot do without because, as the apostle went on to say (Acts 4:12), "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

No one else, no other name ... than Jesus Christ. When we come to him, we come for salvation. Let's understand that. It means that when anyone comes to him in faith, that person is saved.

Day 2:A staggering thought Luke 24:1-8

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" That's what the angels told the faithful women who had brought spices to anoint Jesus' body (vv 5). And to help them take in these stunning words, the angels added (vv 6-7), *"Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be*

delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”

That’s what Jesus said would happen ... and it did!

Then later that same day, two of his disciples are walking to the village of Emmaus and they are having difficulty believing the reports of the resurrection. But now – though they are kept from recognising him – the risen Lord himself comes walking alongside them. And he says to them (Luke 24:25-27), *“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?”* And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explains to them what the Scriptures say about him.

What the Scriptures said would happen ... did!

And when he is with his disciples back in Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus reminds them (Luke 24:44), *“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

God had inspired what was written, so whatever was prophesied in the Old Testament had to come about (John 10:35): *“The Scripture cannot be broken.”*

But you may be asking, “Why was it necessary for the Son of Man to be delivered into the hands of sinful men?”

Let’s explore that.

In Isaiah 53 there is a look ahead to the suffering of Christ that chills the spine with its accuracy. Here is what the prophet says (Isaiah 53:3-5, edited): *“He was despised and*

rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

These are very telling words, aren’t they?

And here is a really staggering thought. The prophet then says (Isaiah 53:6), *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* Then a few verses on we read (v10a), *“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer.”* Just think about that for a moment.

God was at work in the crucifixion.

Oh, the hosts of hell may have thought they were in control. The enemies of Christ were congratulating themselves. But God was at work as well. Christ – the sinless one – had to die so that we could be forgiven. For our pardon and our peace he was nailed to the cross. To die, not for any wrongdoing on his part – the charges which had been brought against him were false – yet to die like a common criminal, with two thieves on either side of him.

And to think that the Lord Jesus went to the cross in utter loneliness. No man could help him. No man could get close to offer sympathy. No man could understand the deep, deep suffering he would go through in bearing the sins of others.

Then at the end of his suffering, Christ lifted up his voice and said (John 19:30), *“It is finished.”* But these were not words of despair. By saying this, he didn’t mean that his

life was fast ebbing away ... he didn't mean that God's plan had been spoiled. What he meant was that he had fully and triumphantly completed the work of redemption. Death was near, but so was victory!

Day 3: Guilty, as charged Romans 3:9-24

Redemption. It's one of those theological words. So what does it mean?

Well, redemption can be illustrated by thinking of a slave who has been tempted away to serve someone who is not his real master. In fact, it's just like us plunging headlong into the trap of sin and going off to work for Satan. But then the real, legal master comes along and he buys the slave back ... at great personal cost. That is what God has done for the sinner and it is known as redemption.

Although we have been disobedient and unfaithful, God's love for us has not diminished. Instead, on the cross, Christ paid the price that will set us free. And what a price! It was a ransom far greater than we are really worth ... paid with his precious blood. Now doesn't that tell us all we need to know about the love of God!

If Jesus had not shed his blood, there would be no redemption, no setting free and no forgiveness. *"Without the shedding of blood,"* the Bible says (Hebrews 9:22), *"there is no forgiveness."* But thanks to his redemptive act, Christ can free us from sin's deadly grip. This is a glorious message to all who will accept what he has done.

At the same time it causes deep offence to those who won't!

Some people, you see, don't like to hear the truth. They don't like being told there is something wrong with them. Like it or not, this is what the cross says. As the great searchlight of the cross beams out across the world, it shows up all the evil. *"This is the verdict,"* says God's Word (John 3:19), *"Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."* People don't want that searchlight beaming into their hearts and showing them their sins. You don't like it ... I don't much care for it, either!

It tells us we are sinners and we are guilty. It also tells us we cannot save ourselves.

Okay, so we may not enjoy hearing the truth, but the fact is we have all broken God's moral law. As a result we've all fallen short of his holy standards.

So now we are in the courtroom.

And there sits the judge, listening to the evidence and arriving at a verdict. Guilty, as charged. This is what often happens in everyday courts, isn't it. So the judge passes sentence. In our case, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

But then something amazing happens. The judge takes off his robes and offers to die on our behalf. And that shows how God is righteous and is able to declare the unrighteous righteous! As the Living Bible puts it (Romans 3:23-24), *"Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal; yet now God declares us 'not guilty' of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins."*

God's mercy, love and grace all came together at the cross. And on the cross, with the work of redemption completed, the Lord Jesus was heard to say (Luke 23:46), "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,*" as he gently bowed his head.

Notice those words of authority. Jesus let his spirit go of his own free will. He had said (John 10:17-18), "*I lay down my life - only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*" He spoke with the authority of the Father who sent him. At Calvary, the King of kings and Lord of lords dismissed his spirit deliberately and willingly.

At that moment the earth shook, as the Spirit of God swept across the land with terrifying force. And in the temple, half a mile from the site of the crucifixion, the great curtain – which blocked the way into the Holy of Holies – tore in half from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Why did it tear? It represented Christ's body, as he opened the way to the Father (Hebrews 10:19-20).

Then what about this. A hard-bitten Roman officer, not usually bothered by human suffering, was made tender (Mark 15:39): "*Surely, this man was the Son of God!*" exclaimed the centurion, humbled by what he had seen and, for all we know, forever changed because of it.

"*Thank you Lord Jesus for dying for me, for bearing my punishment on Calvary.*" Many a child has sung those words over the years and understood them. There's a beautiful simplicity about them. And we too should understand that in shedding his precious blood on the cross, the Lord Jesus was making it possible for men and women,

boys and girls to find forgiveness and enjoy the freedom that Christ promises to those who will place their trust in him.

Let me ask you, my friend, have you done that?

Day 4: Stumbling 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

During one of his many fasts, the Indian political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi requested that some visiting Christian missionaries sing a hymn.

"Which hymn?" they asked.

"The one that expresses all that is deepest in your faith," he answered.

In response they chose to sing Isaac Watts' great classic, "When I survey the wondrous cross". And it is in these daily moments together that we are thinking about that very cross; the one "on which the Prince of glory died", as the hymn writer put it.

At Calvary, the Lord Jesus Christ became a substitute. That's to say, he died in the place of the sinner. This was God's great plan of rescue. We cannot rescue ourselves. We cannot save ourselves from the eternal consequences of sin. Christ is the only answer.

But then someone might ask, "Why has God has made us the way we are, then he condemns us for it?"

Well, we've got to understand that God did not make us the way we are. Now don't get me wrong on this. God made us in his image, but we have fallen. And now we are shattered images of God. That is why we can be kind, creative and gracious one moment ... yet mean, destructive

and ugly the next. That is also why we can never measure up to the high and holy standards of God. We need a Saviour – one who is perfect and without sin, yet who has taken upon himself the end-results of our sin. We need Jesus Christ, because we are told in Romans 8:1 that “*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

Having said that, there are those who simply don’t want to know and who, therefore, stumble over the message of the cross. Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 1:22-23), “*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*” And this ‘not-wanting- to-know’ business can be summed up in one word. Unbelief.

Unbelief is always the reason behind a person refusing to accept God’s way. And unbelief is very good at putting up a smoke-screen; it is very good at hiding itself behind weak excuses. We are told, for instance, that the Jews wanted miraculous signs. They wanted to see something supernatural take place, then they would believe the gospel. The funny thing is, even though the Lord Jesus performed miracle after miracle among these people, most of them still would not believe.

You see, during Israel’s troubled history the hope grew that God would send a Messiah-king. The people had in mind a mighty military leader; one who would deliver them from Roman oppression and set up an earthly throne and kingdom. So when they heard the teaching and saw the miracles of Jesus, it certainly got them thinking (John 7:26-27,31,41-42). But they didn’t go a lot on humility and

meekness – two characteristics of Christ. And that the Messiah would die on a cross was unthinkable, particularly since the Old Testament stated that anyone who died on a tree was cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:23).

In John’s gospel, the ninth chapter, we find a specific example of Jewish unbelief. Here is this man who has been born blind and Jesus heals him, but some of his neighbours simply refuse to believe he is the same person! “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” they ask. Some say he is, while others say, “No, he only looks like him.” Then when he is taken before the Pharisees and he gives his testimony of miraculous healing, all they are bothered about is that he was healed on the Sabbath. Not the done thing! And when the man says that if Jesus were not from God he would not have been able to heal him, these religious leaders throw the man out!

Christ didn’t fit in with their preconceived ideas. He didn’t dot their i’s and cross their t’s. So, on another occasion, it comes as no surprise that the Lord Jesus answered them the way he did.

Knowing what an insincere lot they really were, when they demanded a sign from him to prove he was of God, he replied (Matthew 12:39), “*A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*” What Jonah had experienced by being three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish can be seen as picturing the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Yet sadly most of the Jewish nation refused to believe even the resurrection, the greatest of all signs.

Day 5: Foolishness Acts 17:16-34

The preaching of Christ crucified was a stumbling block to many Jewish people. The fact that he was the long-awaited Messiah was very hard for them to accept. Then it was also treated as foolishness by many Gentiles (that's to say, those who were not Jewish).

By the way, the titles Christ and Messiah mean the same thing. 'Messiah' is the Hebrew word and 'Christ' is how it would be translated into Greek. These words mean that the Lord Jesus is the anointed one, the sent one. And he was specially sent to go to the cross.

Now the ancient Greeks were very drawn to human wisdom, so they didn't think much of the message of the cross and, what was to them, the senseless death of an obscure Galilean. Instead, they felt that their ability to reason and their style of life would please any gods there were. This would have been very nice, except for the fact that the gods themselves were pretty useless! Not one of them could satisfy the hunger of the human heart. And if we go to the book of Acts, chapter 17, we find an example of Gentile unbelief.

Paul was alone in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. This was the major university city in those days, a place where many differing schools of philosophy competed to get a hearing. It was also a place where there were all sorts of idols. This greatly distressed the apostle. "So," as we read in verse 17, "*he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day.*" Then "a group of

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him." And because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, he got called a babbler.

Here was this fellow going on about something that made no sense to these brilliant minds. Did I just say, "Brilliant"? By the standards of the world, possibly. But a mind that won't accept spiritual reality – a mind in unbelief – is a dark place. And to show you what I mean, here's how they saw things ...

The Epicureans thought that indulgence was the key to life, so they were all for having a good time. (Plenty still around like that!) If there is a God, they claimed, he is not interested and so everything happens by chance.

As for the Stoics, theirs was a 'grin and bear it' approach. People should be above passion and remain unmoved by joy and grief. (Not much use inviting them to the party!) They reckoned that indifference was the key to life.

Yet although these two schools of thought were in such disagreement, they did come together on one thing. They both considered Paul to be a peddler of some second-rate religion that could not possibly appeal to intelligent people! Nevertheless some years later he would write (Romans 1:16), "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*"

Now, as it happened, these folk in Athens liked to sit around exchanging ideas, and they invited Paul along to defend his teaching. Well, he went one better than that. He spoke of the need for each of us to turn away from our sins. He spoke of the judgment that was coming. And of

course he knew the one who would carry out that judgment: the one who had died on the cross and had risen again (Acts 17:30-31). The one he had met on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-31).

Paul knew something else, too. He knew that because Jesus rose again ... because he lives ... the grave holds no more terror for those who will repent and believe. Because Jesus rose again there is the sure hope of resurrection to eternal life for the believer. *“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,”* declares the apostle (1 Corinthians 15:20). So as Christians, our bodies may go to the grave, but they are going to be raised on the great resurrection morning. *“Because I live, you also will live,”* the Lord Jesus promises (John 14:19).

Yet there is another certainty. A most dreadful one. For the unbeliever it will mean resurrection to an eternal hell. Christ’s resurrection guarantees this, too. For, as we’re told in the book of Revelation, he holds “the keys”. He says (Revelation 1:18 KJV), *“I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”*

Day 6: “At-one-ment” Hebrews 10:1-10

From Genesis all the way through to Revelation we can trace a ‘thin red line’. What is this thin red line? It has to do with blood being shed, and it is a reminder of the innocent sacrifice that has been made for the guilty sinner. What’s more, the Bible clearly states that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).

Yet someone might say, “I don’t get that. I don’t understand why God would demand blood.”

Okay, so the idea of blood being shed isn’t popular. Nevertheless it is at the very heart of the Christian faith. The fact of the matter is: without it we cannot be saved.

When we talk about what keeps life going we think of the blood that is making its way through our veins. In the book of Leviticus we are told that the life of a creature is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). And in the history of Israel we read of the blood sacrifice – the life poured out – which is a picture of the ultimate, perfect sacrifice.

Now if you were to look up the word ‘sacrifice’ in a dictionary, you would find that it means ‘giving something up ... making an offering.’ And the details of the sacrifices to the one true God are described in Leviticus. From there we learn these things:

1. Because sacrifice is always made to God himself, only the best is good enough.
2. It is God’s way for men to approach him and make their peace with him. You may also be interested to know that Adam, Abel, Noah and Abraham all had their altars.
3. Sacrifice is a substitution, and sometimes the death of a sacrificed animal would be seen as taking the place of the person who brought it.

Under Old Testament law, therefore, sacrifices were a very practical means of dealing with the problem of sin’s guilt. Yet this was only a shadow of what was to come. A shadow which became a reality when Jesus Christ offered

himself unblemished to God and gave his life on the cross. Of course standing on our side of the cross we can fully appreciate this. But in Old Testament times the picture was a bit hazy. God's people – the people of Israel – didn't understand so well.

Back then there were several kinds of sacrifice and all of them pointed to the work of the Lord Jesus. Out of the five main offerings, three were what is known as sweet savour offerings. These were a picture of the willingness and devotion of the Lord Jesus to do the will of God. The other two were sin offerings, showing what Christ would do to secure our forgiveness.

Forgiveness. We need it ... and we need to be brought back into harmony with God. This is what the people who wrote the Bible were concerned about more than anything else. How can we enjoy friendship with God? Sin has separated us from him – all of us are like sheep, going our own way – so our most basic need is to be made “at one” with him. But in the days before Christ, even though sacrifices were being made to atone for sin, they had to be repeated. And, as a number of Old Testament writers came to realise the problem of sin would have to be dealt with by God himself. So what did he do?

He made the punishment we deserve fall on ... whom? The Lord Jesus Christ (see Isaiah 53:6).

And on the cross, after he had given up his spirit, the curtain hanging in the temple was torn in two. This was God's dramatic way of declaring that we no longer have to be cut off from him. Christ had made atonement for sin, once for all (Hebrews 7:26-27; 9:12, 28; 10:10).

For those who have asked the Lord Jesus into their hearts and lives, the guilt of sin has been removed. “*And since by his blood he did all this for us as sinners,*” the Living Bible says (see Romans 5:8-11), “*how much more will he do for us now that he has declared us not guilty? Now he will save us from all God's wrath to come.*” Then we are urged to consider, “*What blessings he must have for us now that we are his friends.*”

Yes, atonement means to be “at one” with God.

Day 7: Remember Matthew 26:17-30

The New Testament tells us how God sent his Son into the world. He lived on this planet for 33 years. Innocent, perfect and real. And on the cross God's Son – Jesus Christ – became the ultimate sacrifice; the sacrifice that need never be repeated. Oh, what a Saviour!

Here's a poem that brings this home to us:

*“Three crosses stood grimly side by side
On the hill at Calvary;
On each a suffering man had died;
Two for their crimes, the Other for me!
“If thou art the Christ,” they taunting said,
“Come down from the cursed tree”;
He heeded no jeering word they said,
But bowing his head, he died for me!”*

(Anon.)

And that is just how he wants us to remember him. Not as a baby who had to be born in a stable because some mean people would not give him a room at the inn. Not as a

teacher who actually knew what he was talking about. Not as the one who sent the money-changers scurrying out of the temple.

Now don't misunderstand me. There are vital lessons we need to learn from his life and ministry. But, above all, he wants us to remember him for what he did at Calvary.

On the very night he was betrayed into the hands of those who would crucify him, he was eating the Passover meal with his disciples. This yearly feast was a reminder of the time in Egypt when Pharaoh kept hardening his heart against God until in the end God hardened his heart against Pharaoh (Exodus 8:15; 11:10). Then Moses told the Israelites that they were to take a lamb that had no defect, kill it and put some of the blood on their doorposts. And when the angel of death swept through the land, taking the lives of the first born, God's people would be spared (see Exodus 12).

Just as the blood that was applied to the doorposts brought salvation from the destroyer, so the blood of Christ is effective in bringing us salvation when applied by faith.

His substitutionary sacrifice and what it has done for us ... that is what Jesus wants us to remember. So at his last Passover meal Jesus introduced what has become known as the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:17-30). The essential elements were already on the table. Namely, bread and wine. And Jesus gave them a new meaning, so that now, when Christians eat the bread and drink the fruit of the vine, they remember his body on the cross and his precious blood that was poured out. The blood that came from his nail-pierced hands and feet, the wounds made by the crown

of thorns and his side, as the soldier's spear was thrust into it.

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins," Jesus said, as he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to his disciples (Matthew 26:27-28). The cup with the wine in it was a symbol of the new and unconditional covenant of grace. Whenever God has made a covenant with man, he has required blood. When God made covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses, blood was shed (Genesis 8:20; 15:10; Exodus 24:5-8). The shedding of blood by animal sacrifice was a vivid and painful demonstration of the loss of life. When God made possible our reconciliation with him, the price was the blood of his Son, as he died to save us from our sin. None of the sacrificial animals of the old covenant could actually take away sin; only the Saviour's blood could do that. And his blood is sufficient to provide forgiveness for all who will believe (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 10:11-14).

"I tell you," Jesus then said to his disciples (Matthew 26:29), *"I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."* That's to say, he will drink it only when he has returned to rule over the earth.

At that time the cup will speak of great joy!

Day 8: The cost Isaiah 53

Sin. It is our attempt at being independent. It is us being like the Prodigal Son and saying we can manage nicely on our own, thank you! So we stray from our roots and this leaves an emptiness where God should be. Then we fill the

empty space with ways of thinking that make sure he stays out of our lives.

But we still feel empty.

And the answer to our emptiness is the same answer we have been getting all along. In each of these bite-sized, daily segments we have been directed to the cross and the one and only Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The name Jesus means 'Saviour'. Announcing that Christ would soon be born into the world, the angel said to Joseph (Matthew 1:21), *"You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

Our sins have spoiled our relationship with God; they have kept us away from him. And I have to tell you something very serious. If this unreconciled state continues until the day we leave this world, we will enter eternity through the gates of hell. Oh, let's not kid ourselves, hell is a very real place. Jesus himself described it as *"the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (Matthew 13:42). In the book of Revelation we are told it is a place of torment, day and night forever and ever (Revelation 20:10). And God's wrath and his judgment are seen in the fact that he will send unrepentant sinners to hell.

Because he is holy, righteous and just, God has to judge sin. He simply cannot turn a blind eye to it. Yet God has provided a way for us to get back to him ... a way we can be reconciled to him. He sent the Lord Jesus to die on the cross in the sinner's place. So now the cross can be seen as a bridge – one that spans the chasm of sin which has separated us from God. Not only that, but the precious

blood of Christ will wash away the sins of all who will believe in him (1 Timothy 2:5): *"For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."* And in being our mediator – our go-between – it cost him so much ...

In the darkness of the night come the flash of the torches. Then the kiss of the traitor. The arrest. The false charges against him. God saying he is God ... that won't do! And in the cold light of day, the mob chants, "Crucify him!" as the spineless Pilate washes away justice in his finger bowl.

"I am innocent of this man's blood," he says (Matthew 27:24). *"It's your responsibility!"*

The truth is, you and I are responsible too.

Christ is flogged and handed over to be crucified. A crown of thorns is twisted around his brow. He is spat on and hit again and again.

The pathway to the cross leads up to Golgotha – the Place of the Skull. "Golgotha" is the grim-sounding Aramaic name for that area, while "Calvary" – its other name – comes from the Latin word for skull. There a soldier hammers the nails in and the Son of God is lifted up on the cross.

(Isaiah 53:7) *"Led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."*

Those who pass by hurl insults. And the chief priests, the scribes and the elders mock him. *"He saved others,"* they say (Matthew 27:42), *"but he can't save himself! He's the*

king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we'll believe in him."

Oh, really!

They are making fun of him with those words, yet we know why he won't come down, don't we? And now we are coming to the darkest moment.

Human wickedness from time past, present and future is laid upon the sinless Saviour. Though he is the treasure of his Father's heart, he endures God's stored rage that is due to our sin.

He who knew no sin has been made sin for us.

Then he cries out in a loud voice (Matthew 27:46), "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" And, as the Son looks up at the one who cannot and will not reply, two eternal hearts tear.

He must die for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18).

Day 9: A life-giving love Romans 5:1-8

There is a painting by the famous Dutch artist Rembrandt which shows "the descent from the cross". And anyone who has seen this painting will have noticed Rembrandt's use of light. It's eerie. It brings home the gruesomeness of Good Friday. Here is the dead Christ, his body mangled and bloody as a result of scourging and crucifixion. Then, as you see him being lowered from the cross, you look into the faces of Joseph of Arimathea and others. Each has an expression of deep sorrow.

That is the thing about the cross. It speaks of terrible pain and deep sorrow. It is a symbol of death. Death has visited every generation; you can count on it to do a thorough job. Whenever the rhythm of a pulse can no longer be felt, the word "death" is spoken again. And it can come upon us so suddenly, so unexpectedly. Whoever we are. Even Schubert's greatest symphony was left unfinished!

So what hope do we have?

The hope of the cross and what happened afterwards.

But before looking at this in more detail, let's make sure we are on the right track. Let's understand that death is the one word that sums up the human dilemma. And, although you are not likely to find it written on any death certificate, the cause of death is always sin. That is what it comes down to. We have tried to go our own way, to live without God. That is sin. Not one of us can say that from the time we were born till today we have been right before God. Not one of us can say that day in, day out we have lived the high-principled life set out in the Ten Commandments. Not one of us has managed to do that. I have sinned ... you have sinned ... against a holy God. And God's Word – the Bible – tells us that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Now the Bible speaks of death in both physical and spiritual terms. Physical death separates the soul from the body; spiritual death separates the soul from God. The soul? It is made up of our intellect and will, our personality and emotions. And when it comes to the matter of eternal death, that is where both soul and body are

separated from God forever. This, by the way, is also known as the ‘second death’ – an expression used in the book of Revelation to describe hell (Revelation 20:14; 21:8).

And that would be the end of the story, except for one thing: God’s love. This is a gracious love, a sacrificial love ... the love of Christ on the cross. For we read in God’s Word (Romans 5:6b), *“Christ died for the ungodly.”* Christ died for people like you and me! And the Word is very clear. It goes on to say (Romans 5:8), *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

In that hope-filled sentence, the greatness of divine love can be seen. Jesus Christ suffered the wrath of God. He endured the human pain of execution and shame ... and a crushing sense of loneliness ... on the hill of Golgotha. He did this not for the righteous but the unrighteous, not for the good but the bad.

He did this with a life-giving love.

Picture the scene at that place just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Men pierce the hands and feet of Jesus. A sky, darkened by sorrow, drapes itself over him. Men stare, mock and quibble over his garments. Little do they know that, in untold agony, he is exhausting the judgment of God against the sins of men. He is demolishing the power of Satan, who has held them captive in fear of death. With a shout of triumph, he exclaims (John 19:30), *“It is finished.”* Then, as he steps through the doorway of death, the great, heavy curtain in the temple is torn in two. By the hand of

God, this thick, woven fabric tears like tissue paper. And the earth shudders.

Yes, it’s true. The cords of love have held the Lord Jesus tighter than any nails.

From the cross he is taken down and laid in a tomb. A big stone is rolled against the entrance. And early on the first Easter morning Mary Magdelene, Salome and another Mary make their way to the tomb, intending to anoint the dead body. But what do they find when they get there? An empty tomb. Then comes the most glorious news ever. News that turns the sorrow that was so deeply felt on Good Friday into a joy beyond words. The joy of Easter Sunday.

An angel announces to them (Matthew 28:6), *“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.”*

Day 10: Turning the page 1Corinthians 15:1-20

“He is not here; he has risen,” the angel declared (Matthew 28:6).

Jesus had predicted his resurrection on a number of occasions. Once he said (Matthew 12:40), *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* The cross was not the end. He had done what he said he would do.

Then consider this.

Had there been no Easter morning, we would be staring into a dark abyss. As the apostle Paul later wrote (1 Corinthians 15:14,17,19), *“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. / If Christ*

has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. / If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

“*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,*” Paul assures us (1 Corinthians 15:20). So there is hope not just for today but for all our tomorrows!

Jesus said (John 14:1, see KJV), “*You believe in God, believe also in me.*” In saying this, he turned the page from the Old Testament to the New Testament. “*You believe in God*” – that is the Old Testament. “*Believe also in me*” – that is the New Testament. And here was a plain statement about his deity; that he is equal with God.

Jesus’ own words leave us in no doubt about this. They tell us exactly who he is. He said:

- “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). In other words, he is the sustainer of life; the one who satisfies.
- “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). Light shows up sin.
- “I am the gate” (John 10:7). Just as a gate opens, he is the only opening that leads to never-ending life.
- “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Jesus cares.
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Here and there in the Old Testament we get glimpses of hope for the believer after death. Job even went so far as to say (Job 19:25), “*I know that my Redeemer lives.*” But it was the coming of Christ that was decisive.

- “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Jesus is all three.
- “I am the vine.” Then he added, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Seven times Christ made an “I am” statement. That’s to say, he took the great, revealing name of God from the Old Testament and identified it with picture after picture of himself in the New Testament (see Exodus 3:14).

Take it in, my friend. Christ was who he claimed to be (Philippians 2:6-8): “*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*” Take it in. The cross of Christ was the costliest gift the world has ever known – when the heavenly Father gave his Son as the only possible payment for our sin. Take it in. His atoning work was fully acceptable to the Father. You want proof? The empty tomb is proof. So now we can be forgiven – we can be made “at one” with God – because the Lord Jesus shed his precious blood.

And don’t forget, he is the first fruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:21-24).

For centuries people have looked at death as an experience of darkness. But 2 Timothy 1:10 tells us that Jesus Christ “*has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*”. Jesus has taken away the power of death. If you want to, you can think of it this

way: Imagine you are at the beach and you see some children digging a hole in the sand. Well, you know what always happens when the sea washes back onto the beach. The waves engulf the hole. They fill it up! That's how death is overwhelmed by God's love and his grace.

And now the light is focused on eternal life. That is the good news at the heart of the Easter message. It means that for those who have entered into Christ's resurrection by faith, death will no longer be a dreaded event. Instead it will be the gateway to being with him – in body and soul – forever.

Day 11: "I no longer live" 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

*"Himself he could not save,
He on the cross must die,
Or mercy cannot come
To ruined sinners nigh;
Yes, Christ the Son of God must bleed,
That sinners might from sin be freed."*

(Albert Midlane)

The cross. The Godhead had planned it. The Father's rejection of the Son he loved so much, the Son going through it and the Holy Spirit enabling him to do so. Then there is something else we need to understand. The Father was completely satisfied with what the Lord Jesus did.

As a result of Christ's finished work on the cross, followed by his burial and resurrection, the sting of death has been

removed. For the believer "*death has been swallowed up in victory*," as Paul says (1 Corinthians 15:54). Then he rubs it in a little! "*Where, O death, is your victory?*" he asks our last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:55). "*Where, O death, is your sting?*"

The Word of God makes it clear that sin is the cause of death. Ezekiel 18:4 says, "*The soul who sins is the one who will die*". And from Genesis we learn that man, who was created to have eternal life, lost this life through disobedience. This meant that from the time of Adam, sin just kept on dealing out death. So if Jesus had not come there would be no hope for anyone.

But there is hope. The cross makes death no longer to be feared for those who have Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Oh, and we need to underline the word "Lord", because the lordship of Christ is essential. It is not a matter of asking God to save us and that's it! That's only the beginning ... the beginning of a special journey.

In the Greek language, *Kyrios* – which is their word for Lord – means owner or master. It can also be used to describe the captain of a ship. And the Lord Jesus is to be the captain of our lives. We are not only to trust him but obey him as well. And when we do, we will find that our lives are no longer empty. There will be purpose and meaning in everything we do because we will be where we should be: Back in fellowship with the one who made us.

Now somebody may say, "It's a great relief to know that the cross makes death something we don't have to fear. But what about in the here and now ... what about the fear

of living? There seems to be so much that causes worry and anxiety in the world today.”

That is true. But we should remember the words of the angel (Matthew 28:6): “*He has risen.*” And soon afterwards, Jesus met the women as they hurried from the empty tomb and he said to them (Matthew 28:10), “*Don’t be afraid.*” What’s more, that very evening, when the disciples were together and frightened, Jesus came and stood among them. “*Peace be with you!*” he said (John 20:19).

How can we have peace in our hearts, why shouldn’t we fear? Because he lives! So we do not have to fear death or anything else.

In today’s world, with its troubles, hate and war, the words of the risen Lord are as full of meaning as when he first said them. And he comes to us in whatever we are going through and says, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to help you.”

He is the one who can bring peace to our hearts and a lasting hope. All because he went to the cross, which saves us from the penalty of sin, then goes on to save us from the power of sin. For as our journey continues, as we make our way heavenwards, so we will grow in our faith. More and more, through the power of Christ and his Spirit living in us, we will become the people God wants us to be.

“*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,*” wrote Paul (Philippians 1:21). And that is the very best way to live. Why? Because you know where you are going when you die; that as a Christian you are on your way to heaven. Yet in the meantime, as the apostle puts it (Galatians 2:20), “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but

Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Day 12: Taking up your cross Luke 9:18-26

In the city of Jerusalem there is an old street which is still known today as the Via Dolorosa, ‘the Way of Sorrow.’ It is the route the Lord Jesus is thought to have followed as he left Pilate’s judgment hall and made his way, under guard, to Golgotha – the place where condemned prisoners were crucified.

To add to their humiliation, it was customary for prisoners to carry the horizontal timber of their crosses (the vertical post being permanently fixed at the site of execution). Apparently, though, Jesus was so weak from the beatings he had endured that the soldiers grabbed a man from the crowd to help him. This man’s name was Simon; he was from the city of Cyrene in Libya. And because his name is mentioned in the Gospels, it makes us wonder if what he saw on that Friday caused him to commit his life to Christ. He and his family were certainly known to the early Christians (see Mark 15:21).

That was one encounter on the way ... and there was another.

Moved with pity at the sight of Jesus’ suffering, some women mourned and wailed for him. Curiously he said to them (Luke 23:28), “*Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.*” Why did he say that? For one thing, he had in mind the future destruction of the city, which he had recently prophesied.

On the previous Sunday huge crowds had welcomed him, but as he drew near to Jerusalem he paused and wept. *“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes,”* he said (Luke 19:41-44 edited). *“The days will come upon you when your enemies will ... hem you in on every side. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you.”*

Within a generation, an invading Roman army would completely destroy Jerusalem, killing most of the inhabitants. But his deeper sorrow was spiritual. In his love for these people, he had remarked (Luke 13:34), *“How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”* Yet they refused to recognise that, in Christ, God himself was visiting them and offering them a priceless gift. The gift of salvation.

Time to accept that gift was limited. It still is. The time to accept it is now, while the Lord Jesus is passing by. And in our encounter with him, we must take heed of what he says (Luke 9:23): *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* My friend, if you want to waste your life, spend it on yourself and your own interests. If you want to invest your life, commit it to Christ and his cause.

So what is it like when you become a Christian?

It is not the soft option, that’s for sure!

The genuine Christian wants to live each day for Jesus Christ. *“It’s no longer my ego that lives, but Christ who lives in me,”* we should be able to say (Galatians 2:20

paraphrase). This includes sharing in his sufferings – is that too much to ask? – so we will also share in his glory (Romans 8:17). And just as the Lord Jesus knew all about human pain, the believer is not exempt from the usual sufferings of this world. In addition to these, our faith in Christ may bring opposition. Yet, whatever our circumstances, we have the comfort of knowing we are not alone. He will always be with us (John 16:33; Matthew 28:20). So although the tunnel may be dark, it won’t be endless ... and someday we will be united with our Lord in heaven. Meanwhile we can actually (Romans 5:3-5) *“rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”*

Then consider this.

Since Christ has died for our sins, wouldn’t it be odd if we carried on sinning and thought little of it? Not that the believer is brought into an instant state of sinless perfection, you understand. But we are, with God’s help, to arm ourselves with the right attitude. The attitude that says a big “no” to sin and a determined “yes” to holy living. In other words, we are to die to the sin we used to give into so easily. We are to turn our backs on the old life, then we will increasingly have victory over temptation.

“I’m done with that life,” we should declare. *“I’m committed to this life and submitted to the will of God.”* (See 1 Peter 4:1-5.)

Have you made your decision yet?

The Bible is the Word of God, inspired by him from cover to cover. As the apostle Peter explains, it was written by men who were moved by God's Spirit (2 Peter 1:21): *"Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."* The Bible is God's communication to us ... totally true and utterly trustworthy. Within its pages we read that when the Lord Jesus Christ came from heaven's glory, he humbled himself ... having taken the very nature of a servant. Then what did he do? He shed his precious blood on the cross. He did this because all of us have been guilty of violating the law of God. All have sinned.

Sin, as we have seen in these studies, is an attitude of independence. And the Bible tells us that the soul who sins will die (Ezekiel 18:4). This has to do with judgment and hell. But in his great kindness, God chose to do the dying for us. Jesus on the cross took the punishment for sin, so we could be forgiven (1 John 4:9): *"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."*

For those who will come humbly to the foot of the cross, there is the sure hope of heaven. Sure hope (Romans 10:9-10) *"that if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."*

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