

# Cruciality of the Cross

By Dr. Dallas Burdette  
Website: [freedominchrist.net](http://freedominchrist.net)  
Email: [dburdette22@charter.net](mailto:dburdette22@charter.net)

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## Is the Cross Crucial in Our lives?

Is the Cross of Jesus crucial in our lives? As we reflect upon the Cross of God's Anointed One, we are immediately confronted with the importance of the Cross of Jesus in God's scheme of redemption for lost humanity (Isaiah 53; Daniel 9:24-27; Acts 8:26-40). **When we tell the story of the Cross, we tell the story of the Gospel.** If someone were to ask us, what is the Gospel of Redemption? What would we say? Surely, the answer is the virgin birth of Jesus, the Cross on Calvary, and the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus tasted Death for every one of us. In the Cross of Christ, we see forgiveness for the sins of us all. **Out of our response to God's way of salvation by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, we meet responsibility toward ethical standards face-to-face with the One who died for us—a change in our moral performance.** For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, we witness Jesus' teaching about the social implications of the Gospel.

## Jesus' Teaching about Our Influence

One of these social teachings of Jesus focuses upon forgiveness, which compassion and clemency are often very difficult for us to accept. Yet, this extension of grace and mercy is one that lacks implementation among many of us as we confront those who sin against us. Do we hold grudges against those who have harmed us? Do our neighbors know that we are Christians? Are we a **light** to the world? Are we the **salt** of the earth? In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He dealt with many areas of life. After setting forth the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10), He went right to the heart of what He wants His people to remember and practice. The following words of Jesus should penetrate the very core of how we live:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. <sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>**Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.** <sup>16</sup>In the

same way, let your light shine before others, that **they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5:13-16)

The hope of the world becoming better is to know Christ. **The condition of mankind in general, without Christ, is in shambles.** Look at the nations that persecute Christians. There are nations that punish their own people if they consider them a threat to their power (North Korea is a classic example). The riots in the various cities in 2021 is a classic example that humanity cannot live its life without God. Paul painted a graphic picture of life without God in Romans 1:18-32.

Apart from the social implications, we are consciously aware that the Cross is not only the story of the Gospel, but is itself the history of the Gospel. **This event in time changed the relationship between God and us and also changed the relationship between us and others.** We cannot discard Jesus and the Cross in our preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God. Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians—written about AD 55 from Ephesus, confessed:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> **For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.** (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)

### **Jesus' Teaching about Forgiveness**

How do we react to Paul's confession about his faith in Jesus? In addition to preaching Jesus and His crucifixion, Paul also focused on ethical behavior. For instance, he issues this admonition: "Be **kind** and **compassionate** to one another, **forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you**" (Ephesians 4:32). One problem that stands in the way of forgiveness is bitterness. In order for us to practice forgiveness, we must eliminate this feeling of resentment and anger from our hearts. Again, we need to listen to Paul as he writes: "**Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice**" (4:31). God's forgiveness is demonstrated in the Cross as confirmed in Jesus' cry from the Cross (Luke 23:34). It is because of the Cross that we can forgive others. Forgiveness is just one aspect that flows from the implications of the Cross of Jesus. **Have we recently read the Sermon on the Mount?** Do we remember the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray? Let us once more tune our ears to hear and grasp Jesus' comments about forgiveness:

"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And **forgive** [stop blaming or taking offense into account] us our debts, as we also have **forgiven** our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' <sup>14</sup> For if you **forgive** other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also **forgive** you. <sup>15</sup> But if you do not **forgive** others their sins, your Father will **not forgive** your sins. (Matthew 6:9-15)

## Jesus Presented as an Atonement for Our Sins

The Cross of Christ is not just one event in history among a dreary catalogue of unrelated events, but rather it is THE “big event.” **On the Cross, Jesus is presented as a sacrifice of Atonement for the sins of humanity. Jesus is presented as our “mercy seat”** (ἱλαστήριον, *hilastērion*, See Romans 3:21-30). It is this happening that gives meaning to the whole of life. In this central episode of history (the Crucifixion), we see the **utter degradation** of humanity as well as the **deeper depth** of God’s holy love for the human race (John 3:16-21). **The Cross of Christ reveals the real nature and meaning of evil in this world.** In Christ’s Crucifixion, we see sin acted out in all its naked blasphemy. This specific act of Crucifixion, in and of itself, is not the darkest deed in all of history since many had been crucified before Jesus was. **What makes this the darkest deed in all of history is the One who died there**—Incarnate Righteousness and Love. Here was One in whose presence many felt the presence of God. Christ died for the dregs of humanity.

Can God accept and save me in spite of all my sinfulness? Has your life been a life of rebellion against God and humanity? Yes! If so, God forgives if we repent. The story of Jonah and Nineveh represent a classic example of forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> **When Jesus called Matthew to follow him, the religious leaders of that day considered a “tax collector” a sinner.** Matthew himself, relates the incident of his call to the ministry and the reaction of the religious leaders (Pharisees). The following story should arrest our attention even to our own lives:

As **Jesus** went on from there, **he saw a man named Matthew** sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.<sup>10</sup> While **Jesus** was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.<sup>11</sup> When the **Pharisees** saw this, they asked his disciples, “**Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?**”<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, **Jesus** said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.<sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ **For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**” (Matthew 9:9-13)

## Jesus Is the “Branch” of Zechariah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah

Within the Book of Zechariah (520 BC—prophesied about two months after Haggai), we read the story of one called Joshua a high priest who was **symbolic of things to come** (3:8). This chapter represents the “**Branch**” (Jesus) coming to do away with sin. In this example, Satan stands before the Lord to accuse Joshua of being a sinner. How did God react to Satan’s accusation? This symbolic story is about the coming of the “**Branch**” (נֹצֵחַ, *šē-māḥ*) and forgiveness. I cite this chapter in order for believers to find comfort in God’s forgiveness “in” and “through” Jesus. We should read the following with joy:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.<sup>2</sup> The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD,

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<sup>1</sup> For a copy of this sermon on Jonah’s Anger versus God’s Mercy, see [freedominchrist.net](http://freedominchrist.net) under the caption RECENT POST and then under the caption COLLECTION OF SERMONS.

who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! **Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?**"

<sup>3</sup> Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. <sup>4</sup> The angel said to those who were standing before him, **"Take off his filthy clothes."** Then he said to Joshua, **"See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you."** <sup>5</sup> Then I said, **"Put a clean turban on his head."** So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by. <sup>6</sup> The angel of the LORD gave this charge to Joshua: <sup>7</sup> "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.' <sup>8</sup> **"Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch [נְצַחַת, *šē-māḥ*, Jesus]. <sup>9</sup> See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the LORD Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. <sup>10</sup> "In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree,' declares the LORD Almighty." (Zechariah 3:1-10; see also Isaiah 4:2; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:15 for more citations on the Branch)**

The word "**Branch**" is a metaphor for Jesus Himself. The following story, as told by Ravi Zacharias, illustrates the utter dreadful conditions of lost humanity in all its foulness. Remember, Jesus came to save. He relates the story of two brothers who were notorious for their wickedness. **One of the brothers suddenly died. The other brother sought out a minister to do the eulogy with one stipulation—he had to refer to his brother as a "saint."** Because of the reputation of this dead brother, the minister refused. After some persuasion and an offer of a substantial financial reward, the minister agreed to the offer. The time came for the minister to deliver the message with the word *saint* associated with the dead brother. He began:

The man you see in the coffin was a vile and debauched individual. He was a liar, a thief, a deceiver, a manipulator, a reprobate, and a hedonist. He destroyed the fortunes, careers, and lives of countless people in this city, some of whom are here today. This man did every dirty, rotten, unconscionable thing you can think of. But compared to his brother who is here, *he was a saint.*<sup>2</sup>

## God's Amazing Forgiveness

**If one repents of this kind of shameful and immoral behavior, God still forgives.** What does the Cross mean to us? Has the Cross changed our attitude toward God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit? **Has Christ's Crucifixion modified our relationship with others?** Are we crucifying the Son of God afresh by our lifestyles? Sin is seen at its worst in this particular Crucifixion. It killed the Son of God. This is "absolute zero" in its actions against God; it is the very rock bottom of moral evil. Yet, **in the Crucifixion of Jesus, we see another story—God's love.** In this horrible Death, we observe God's Atoning and Redeeming action in the Passion of that Man upon the Cross. The Cross is not just some theological fiction or some historical fact, but it is the event of God's amazing and costly wonder of forgiveness. God offers forgiveness; His ways are not our ways. **He grants repentance (God's gift to us) as an**

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<sup>2</sup>Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Dallas • London • Vancouver • Melbourne: Word Publishing, 1994), 134-135.

**act of His love for the wayward person.** He addressed the wayward individual through Isaiah. We should read and reread God's actions toward the sinner:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. <sup>7</sup>**Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.** Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. <sup>8</sup>**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,”** declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup>**“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.** (Isaiah 55:6-9)

**What is God saying to Isaiah the prophet? He is saying that I am not like you. If one sins against you, you want to still hold this person accountable. Yet, I am not like that! “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” If a person repents, God says that I will forgive.**

### The Cross an Act of God

**The Cross is not only an act of Pilate, but an act of God—slain from the foundation of the world** (Revelation 13:8; 1 Peter 1:20). God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). **It is this Gospel that has moved millions in this world.** Has this Gospel motivated us in the way we live and act? We can deny the benefits of the Cross by rejecting the social and moral implications of the Gospel. As an individual, I am conscious that no amount of works can put us in a right relationship with God, but **there is something drastically wrong with our concept of the Gospel if it does not result in good works** (Titus 2:11-12). In the Cross of Jesus, we see righteousness and grace fused together (Psalm 85:10). The Cross is something actual—it is love Incarnate.

**Even though Christ submitted Himself for crucifixion, nevertheless, Christ is not a passive victim in this drama of sin and salvation, but an active actor from Gethsemane to Calvary, all for the redemption of humanity.** On this Cross, we hear the cry of desolation—“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He did this in order to prevent us from crying out—My God, My God, why have you forsaken us? Was Christ saying “amen” on behalf of us to the rightful judgment of God upon the sins of the world? This cry from the Cross reminds us of the utter desolation of the Son of God—utterly alone.

### What Does the Cross Mean to Us?

“Is your father a Christian?” said a gentleman to a little boy on one occasion. “Yes sir,” said the little boy, “but I believe he has not worked much at it lately.”<sup>3</sup>

**What does the Cross mean to us?** Jesus did something to human history. Do we just talk about the mysteries of the Faith? **We may talk about religion by the hour, and yet it may not be the dominant and abiding motive of our lives.** Christ takes a backseat. We should

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<sup>3</sup> George Salmon, *Non-Miraculous Christianity and Other Sermons* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1887), 42. This story first appeared in *Dublin Daily Express*, Oct. 13, 1880. George Salmon (1819-1904), chancellor of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Dublin.

always be conscious that the Church is not simply a body of people who hold to correct teaching(s), but rather the church holds to Christ as the Savior of the world. **No Christian who has set himself or herself to do the will of God will spurn God's call for commitment. Are we committed to God's Gospel?** What does the Cross of Jesus mean to us? Is the Cross of Jesus crucial in our lives? Finally, I call attention to Joshua<sup>4</sup> as he approached the end of his life (died at the age of 110—1385 BC). He called for commitment, which, we, too, should pay attention:

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then **choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. **But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.**” (Joshua 24:14-15)

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<sup>4</sup> The Book of Joshua covers a period of twenty-one years (1406-1385 BC).