

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

In 2004 Mel Gibson released a film entitled, "*The Passion of the Christ*." Gibson's goal was to *authentically portray* the events surrounding Jesus crucifixion. His film earned an R-rating for violence. And predictably, "*The Passion of the Christ*" was criticized by people for its excessive brutality. The BBC issued the following review, "*The Passion of the Christ may be the most relentless horror film since The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. It is certainly more violent...*" Another review called it, "a splatter film." I saw Mel Gibson's movie more than once and here's my observation... If his goal was to accurately depict the crucifixion of Jesus *he didn't go far enough*. The real violence was far worse than the film's depiction.

Jesus of Nazareth was condemned to die by the most horrific method ever devised. Crucifixion tormented as long as possible before it killed. The Persians invented crucifixion 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The Romans took the cross and perfected it as a means of torture. Crucifixion was so brutal, and ugly, and heinous it was reserved for foreigners and slaves. Roman citizens were *beheaded* not *crucified*.

Ironically, today's rock stars tattoo crosses on their bodies - baseball players cross themselves as they step into the batter's box - jewelers beat down gold into necklaces in the shape of a cross - even candy-makers market chocolate candy crosses for Christians to eat on Good Friday. Today the cross has been sanitized, popularized, even secularized – but in ancient times the cross was grotesque, repulsive, disturbing... "*The Old, Rugged Cross*" was "*the emblem of suffering and shame*."

Josephus, the Jewish historian, lived in the first century. He saw his share of crucifixions. He called it, "*the most wretched of deaths*". Cicero thought Romans citizens should be sheltered from the sight of a cross.

Even the early church was repulsed by the cross. Crosses were banned from depiction in the arts for the first four centuries of church history. Not until Constantine abolished the cross as a form of execution did the church embrace it as a symbol. CS Lewis points out, "*The crucifixion did not become common in art until all who'd seen a real one had died off*." If you had watched a live crucifixion you'd shiver in horror - you'd *turn your head* - it would *turn your stomach* – for weeks you'd have nightmares.

This morning our **Essentials** series deals with the **Crucifixion** – *what it means and why it matters*. It's interesting, our English word "*crux*" is from the word "*crucifixion*." The *crux* is the core of an issue – the pivotal point. And the cross is the *crux* of Christianity. All that we've called *Essential* to this point – *the nature of God, His creation, status of man, the covenants and mission of Jesus* all turn on the cross. It's the heartbeat of Christianity. Martin Luther put it, "*If you want to understand the Christian message you must start with the wounds of Christ*." *This is what we'll do today...*

We'll look at His wounds **historically** – then **theologically**. You need to know how He suffered, then what it accomplished in heaven and on earth. Here's today's statement of faith. **We believe Jesus was crucified and spilt sinless blood. On the cross He carried out our sentence, died in our place, and atoned for our sin. Though the cross stood for weakness and foolishness, the crucifixion now conveys God's power and wisdom.**

Jesus was arrested in East Jerusalem, on the hill by the olive press. He was interrogated by

the High Priest – falsely accused by the Jewish high court. All the while the Temple cops were slapping Him around. When the High Priest ripped his tunic, and shouted blasphemy - the cops took off their gloves... they pummeled Him with their fists, pulled out His beard, slapped Him with an open hand, spat in His holy face... And there is not a friend to be found – no one to testify on His behalf, or fetch water, or wipe His wounds... *He hasn't even reached Pilate...*

Pontus Pilate was the Roman Governor. His job was to appease the Jews and keep the peace. He could care less about *justice* or *Jesus*. Pilate's wife nagged him. She suggested he set Jesus free. Obviously, they weren't that close. Pilate wanted the Jews off his back, so he ordered Jesus' back to be scourged. He condemned Him to death.

Crucifixion began with a scourging. The Romans called it "[the half-way death](#)." The beating was so vicious many of its victims never survived. The flagellum or whip was made of a dozen leather strips attached to a single handle. A lead ball was tied to the end of the cords. In between the handle and lead were sharp pieces of glass, and metal, and ivory. The victim's wrists were tied together and he was dangled about a foot off the ground. Each flick of the whip would cut across the victim's back.

The first blows made a whelp. Soon, the whip dug into skin - the back was bleeding. By the 7th or 8th lash the flagellum was churning muscle. At times the whip snagged on a rib and a piece of bone flew off the live victim. After 39 strikes the person's back was the texture of hamburger and his internal organs were exposed. Finally, the ropes were cut and the man fell to the ground in a puddle of blood and sweat and urine and feces.

Isaiah 52:14 says the face of Jesus was so disfigured He no longer had a human resemblance. Like a boxer who'd gone 15 rounds – or the victim of a plane crash... if a funeral was held it would've been *closed casket*. Philo, a Jewish statesman, wrote, "[Arrested, scourged, tortured... all their bodies could make room for... yet kept in reserve, was the cross.](#)"

Since wood was scarce in Israel, crosses were recycled. The cross of Jesus was stained with the blood and fluids of previous criminals. There were also nail holes in the cross from prior crucifixions. This is how the victim was attached to the cross – 7" spikes were driven into his wrists and feet. The word "[crucifix](#)" means "[fixed to the cross.](#)"

Roman crucifixions were carried out in public places – by the road or on a hill overlooking a market. Imagine, going to Wal-Mart and seeing a naked man hanging from a light pole, bleeding and squirming in agony. Though crosses came in different shapes and sizes usually the victim was eye-level with the crowd. He looked his accusers face to face. Crucifixions were like hangings in frontier America. Folks gathered to watch. It was a public spectacle. Mockers shouted expletives. Often the crucified criminal fought back. He spit or tried to urinate on the crowd. What a contrast when Jesus prayed, "[Father, forgive them...](#)"

Death by crucifixion was often death by asphyxiation. To fill his lungs with air a crucified man would pull his weight up on the nails. Each breath sent paralyzing pain ricocheting through his body. When he decided to stop gasping his body slumped and suffocated.

There's evidence the Romans added a seat – a piece of wood on which the man would sit. This helped him breathe and extended his torture. Often victims slid off the seat to hasten their death. Some scholars think the Romans kept victims seated by nailing their private parts to the cross. When Rome sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD, thousands of Jews were crucified. Seneca wrote, "[I see crosses, made in many different ways: some have their victims head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the wood.](#)"

Generally a man stayed on the cross for days. In contrast Jesus died rather quickly. He was nailed to the cross at 9 AM and died by 3 PM. Rather than suffocation, the timeframe indicates Jesus probably died from cardiac arrest. Non-oxygenated blood gets heavy. The heart pumps overtime to move the sluggish fluid - the pulse rate soars - the heart can't keep up and explodes.

Jesus may've literally died of a broken heart.

There's one astonishing detail of the crucifixion you really need to know. In the 800 year history of crucifixion Jesus was the only man who volunteered to be crucified. Yes, the *Jews* sentenced Him. And the *Romans* hammered in the nails. And *our sin* made it necessary. But ultimately, *the will of God* sent Jesus to the cross.

In John 10:17 Jesus said of His life. "No one takes it from Me... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again." Jesus told Pilate he could have no power over Him unless it had been granted by God. In Isaiah the Messiah makes these statements... "I gave My back to those who struck Me..." (50:6) "It pleased the LORD to bruise Him..." (53:10) "The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." (53:6) Jesus was nobody's victim, or pansy, or whipping boy. Our Lord was brave. Because He *obeyed God* and *loved you* Jesus was crucified.

As we read in 1Corinthians 1, the Jews saw the cross as folly - the Greeks as weakness - but ironically, God chose the cross of Jesus to reveal His power and wisdom. The cross shows the depth of our sin, and the extent of God's love. Salvation comes through the cross.

In fact, theologians use terms to describe the various facets of Jesus' work on the cross. A lot was accomplished - **substitution, justification, redemption, propitiation, sanctification** – and God's **vindication**. You'll cherish the old rugged cross when you realize why it matters.

It reminds me of the pastor's youngest son. Being raised in the church the little guy had always heard his dad talk about terms like *justification* and *propitiation* - but he never really learned their meaning. One day at school, his teacher asked the class, "Can anyone tell me the definition of the word *procrastination*?" The preacher's son shot up his hand. He said, "I'm not sure, but my church believes in it!" Let's stop the *procrastination* and define some important terms.

First is **substitution** – it's short for the phrase, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement..." *Penal* means *penalty*. And the penalty for sin is death. If there's any ambiguity or fuzziness on this point it's not God's fault. For 1500 years God's people brought lambs and goats to the Temple. A Jew would breed and nurture a lamb - the pick of the litter. He'd lay a hand on its head - confess his sins - then watch the priest slit the throat of that innocent lamb. *It was like watching someone slaughter your pet...* The priest would drain its blood – then later, sprinkled it before God. *And you would cry!* This lamb was a substitute for you. You sinned, but the innocent lamb died. It would *shake you up*. It would *break your heart*.

And this act of *penal substitution* produced atonement with God. The definition of atonement is embedded in its spelling - **At-One-ment**. Sin separates us from God, and from each other. Sin alienates us and pushes us apart. It causes us to *hide shame* and *hurl blame*. But when I'm forgiven I'm *at-one* again with God and man.

And all the good works, and charitable deeds, and religious rituals will never atone for my sin. The Bible goes graphic to hammer this home. Isaiah 64:6, "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags." The Hebrew renders it, "used menstrual clothes," "bloody tampons." In Philippians 2 Paul called his own righteousness "dung" – a fresh pile of dog poop.

When you think of *Baptist legalism*, or *Catholic ritualism*, or *Pentecostal self-righteousness*, or the *spiritual pride* of some *Calvary Chapels*, or the *commitment* of a *Mormon missionary*, or *Oprah's spirituality*, or *Islamic fundamentalism*, or *Jewish Orthodoxy*, or the *self-denial* of a *Buddhist monk*, or the *boldness* of a *Jehovah's Witness*... or any other means by which a man might try to make himself right with God... think of dog poop! Only Jesus satisfies God. Everything else is filthy rags.

This is why I have no desire whatsoever to make you religious. Can you imagine at the end of time standing before God – your eternal destiny is on the line – you stick out your chest with

pride and you hand a box to God. *"Here God, I think you'll be impressed. Open the box and I'm sure I'll win your approval."* You put all your goodness and religious pride in that box, but when God opens it all He sees are greasy rags and dog poop.

Religion doesn't please God. Hell is full of religious folks. Hebrews 9:22 reads, *"Without (the) shedding of blood there is no remission (of sin)."* To be at-one with God you need a substitute – a sacrifice - you need Jesus.

Here's another word, **justification**. Romans 3:24 tells us through Jesus' crucifixion we're *"being justified freely by his grace."* Galatians 2:16 reads, *"a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus..."* Justification is a type of treatment. In a biblical sense, to be **"justified"** is to be treated *just-as-if-I'd* never sinned – as if I were just or sinless. And if you believe in the crucified Christ this is how God treats you!

It reminds me of the rich Englishman who purchased a Rolls Royce. He shipped it to France where he planned to tour Europe. A few days into his journey the car broke down. The man called the dealership for help... Quickly a crew of mechanics flew across the English Channel, and worked nonstop until the repairs on the automobile were complete. When the man arrived home he expected a hefty bill - that never came. After several weeks, he called and inquired about the cost of the service...

The lady responded, *"What bill?"* *"The bill for the repairs you made on my car in France."* She said, *"What repairs?"* *"You remember. A team of mechanics flew to France to work on my car? Check your records..."* After a long pause the woman told him, *"Sir, I'm sorry but we have no record of any Rolls Royce ever breaking down and needing repairs."* Now that's the way every car dealership should operate!

Justification doesn't mean God ignores a break down. He fixes it... but it's not recorded. He considers the malfunction to have never occurred. God services us - tunes us – fixes our flats - repairs the damage caused by our sin... then never charges us a dime. What an incredible warranty!

Justification includes forgiveness, but it's more than forgiveness... Forgiveness is me paying off your credit card debt... but you can run it up again. Justification goes further – I pay off your debt, then I supply you a permanent line of credit so you'll always maintain a positive balance. On the cross Jesus guaranteed you'll never get caught with insufficient funds!

And Romans says we're **"justified freely"** or literally **"without a cause"**. There's nothing we've *done* or *can do* to merit this kind of treatment. This is grace – *it's unearned, and undeserved, and uncaused by me*. Its only explanation is God's love and the cross of Jesus.

Here's a third word defined by the cross, **redemption**. In Romans 3:24 Paul adds to our justification, *"the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* Redemption is the idea that on the cross Jesus paid a ransom to set us free. Jesus proclaims in Matthew 20:28, *"Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

Slave markets were common across the Roman Empire. People were always buying and selling slaves. Sometimes slaves were purchased for temporary use. At other times slaves became permanent possessions. But on rare occasions, slaves were purchased to be set free. This is the redemption Jesus paid for on the cross.

Sadly, slavery is still around. We become slaves to sin - *slaves to lust, and greed, and meth, and pride, and boredom, and alcohol, and pornography, and prescription drugs, and peer pressure*. The most enlightening class I took in college was a course on addiction. I'll never forget the Gamblers Anonymous class. Grown men told chilling stories of stealing their grandma's social security check to place a bet on a ballgame. It reminded me how thoroughly sin can dominate a life.

When sin is your pimp there's no escape. To live a different kind of life there has to be new

ownership. You've got to find a way out. This is what Jesus did on the cross. He redeemed us. He purchased what was lost. [Jesus did a buy back](#). He earned the right to possess us and bless us. Redeemed people have been granted permission to start over, from the God of the universe. And that permission was granted on the cross.

Here's another word, [propitiation](#). Through His crucifixion Jesus has become our propitiation – Jesus satisfied the justice and wrath of God. Romans 3:25 says of Jesus, "[Whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood...](#)" "Propitiation" means "*to appease*." Sin is *handled legally through justification*. But it's *satisfied emotionally through propitiation*.

There were two similar sacrifices in the OT. The **sin offering** covered a person's sin - whereas the **burnt offering** offered a sweet aroma to God. Today, the cross does both. Jesus *justifies man and propitiates God*.

Think of it this way, Psalm 7:11 tells us, "[God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day](#)." You don't hear this much in today's churches. It's easier to talk about the love of God than His wrath. But God is ticked off at sin, and angry at sinners... God is pure and holy to the core. And there are times when sin gets so ugly and destructive I'm sure He feels like lowering the boom – pouring out judgment like rain.

My sensibilities are a far cry from God's, yet there are times when I watch the nightly news, and I get angry. How can people be so evil? Here's a sample from last night's news...

[Six bodies were found in Mexico shot and tortured from drug violence.](#)

[A crazed gunman in Binghamton, NY murders 13 innocent people.](#)

[A western Pennsylvania woman drugs her 13 year old daughter so her 40 year old boyfriend can rape the little girl.](#)

[A 23 year old decapitated his 5 year old sister with a kitchen knife.](#)

And the list goes on and on... It's tough to stomach this stuff. It makes you downright mad. And if it angers me, how do you think God feels? I'm only exposed to this evil for a few minutes on the nightly news, whereas, God sees every *grimy act* done in every *slimy place*. Trust me, He gets extremely angry! It arouses His wrath! If God is a loving God how could He not be?

I read of a man in Tyler, Texas named "[Robert Hardy](#)." He woke up one night and went to check on his 3 month old son. The bassinet was tipped over and the child was gone. He returned to the bedroom to see if his wife had the baby. She didn't. They both ran downstairs in search of the child. When Hardy walked into his study he noticed the tank where he kept his pet python was empty. The 12 foot snake had pushed off the glass top and slithered upstairs. The snake tipped over the bassinet, and ate the baby. Hardy was so enraged – so angry - he ran outside, found an ax, and chopped the snake into a thousand pieces. *And who could blame him?* The snake got what it deserved.

And God looks down on the snake-like actions of humanity. He sees the predators slithering by, consuming innocent people - and He's outraged! His holiness gets trampled – and not only by the snake-like actions of others - but there've been times *when I've slithered with the best of them*. We're all guilty of satisfying ourselves at other people's expense.

How many times was God tempted to pick up an ax and chop up the snakes? *But He waited*. Romans 3:25 tells us, "[God passed over the sins that were previously committed...](#)" He waited for a day 2000 years ago... God waited for the day when He nailed His Son to a Roman cross. On the cross God vented His anger toward the sin of the world. He brought down His ax on His only Son, Jesus. This is amazing, God overlooked sin in times past – He suppressed His *righteous rage* – because He planned all along to take out His wrath on His Son!

Sandy Adams deserves to be hacked to pieces, yet God unleashed his anger towards me on His only Son. This is love that *moistens the eyes*, and *boggles the brain*. How can God love me

that much? Yet He does!

And grasp the implications... In Christ we are no longer under God's judgment. When bad stuff happens it doesn't mean God is angry at us. God is our Father and like all good dads He disciplines His kids. But God's anger towards us and our sin were resolved at the cross. His only response to us now is love. God's wrath was dealt with on the cross.

Here's another word with two definitions, **sanctification**. It means "to dedicate" and it also means "to purge or cleanse." In fact, the OT joins these meanings together. *Objects were made holy through washing.* Hebrews 13:12 says, "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate." The blood of Jesus shed on the cross – outside the city gates – washes us and cleanses us.

Here's a problem with sin we don't often consider when we're tempted – *sin leaves a stain*. A filthy feeling accompanies sin. Sin denigrates, and cheapens, and dirties. Sin leaves a greasy film over our soul.

Throughout the Bible you'll notice the Jews had a fixation with washing and cleansing. They're always in the water. Become a Christian and you get baptized. *Why?* There is a deep longing in our soul to be pure again.

In fact, it doesn't matter if you were the one who sinned or if you were sinned against – sin has a defiling effect. Emergency room nurses will tell you when a woman is raped usually the first thing she does is shower. Even though she didn't cause the defilement – she was the victim - nevertheless there's a longing in her heart to be clean and washed.

Understand the whole Gospel - on the cross Jesus earned forgiveness for sinners, but He also gained cleansing and purity for those who've been sinned against. Have you been abused? – *Verbally, physically, sexually...*

I know promiscuous women who allow men to take advantage of them, because they've been told in so many ways they don't deserve any better. They see themselves as damaged goods rather than clean and sanctified.

Some Christian women who have not been pure wonder if they deserve to wear white at their wedding. The answer is *no* and *yes*. *No*, they don't deserve to dress in white. But *yes*, they should... because the blood of Jesus cleanses and they should see themselves in Christ. Isaiah 1:18, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow..." This is the cleansing I desire for you! I pray you sense this deep down soul-washing in your life. It was paid for on the cross.

As the old hymn puts it, "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains."

A final word that describes what Jesus did on the cross - **vindication**. Romans 3:26 says the cross allows God to "be just and the justifier." You've seen how the cross is the power of God. Here is its wisdom. Songwriter, Steve Camp, has a song title, "Christ died for God." We know Jesus died for us, but how did He die for God. Jesus' motivation on the cross was not just *our salvation*, but *God's vindication*.

Understand our sin puts God in an awkward situation. He's pulled in two directions. On the one hand, His justice demands that our sin be punished. On the other hand, His love compels God to forgive us and to fix us. God loves us and wants to help us, but His justice cannot let sin slide.

Think of what's happened to our American judiciary. Our courts suffer a crisis of confidence because we've allowed too many obvious criminals to walk on technicalities - or get off with a mere slap-on-the-wrist... We wonder if our courts are still capable of meting out justice. God won't allow this kind of erosion of confidence to occur in His court. As much as He loves us, God can't just allow us to get off scot-free.

This is why *Christ died for God*. The cross made a way for God to *save us* and *save face* at the same time. On the cross *sin was punished*, AND *the sinner was forgiven*. The cross of Jesus vindicated God's character and magnified God's wisdom

The crucifixion of Jesus... both the wisdom and the power of God... Charles Spurgeon writes, "Stand at the foot of the cross, and count the purple drops by which you have been cleansed: see the thorn-crown; mark His scourged shoulders, still gushing with crimson streams... And if you do not lie prostrate on the ground before that cross, you have never seen it."

Today, see Jesus on the cross... your *substitution, justification, redemption, propitiation, sanctification... and God's vindication*.

Let's close with our statement of faith. *We believe Jesus was crucified and spilt sinless blood. On the cross He carried out our sentence, died in our place, and atoned for our sin. Though the cross stood for weakness and foolishness, the crucifixion now conveys God's power and wisdom.*