



CHRIST ON THE CROSS

BY JAMES MACDONALD

Not until the second century was the cross thought of as anything but a hideous instrument of death. Only after the deaths of everyone who had actually seen a crucifixion did people represent the cross as something sacred. Today, the cross itself has become big business. But it was never intended to be some lucky trinket. Is it any wonder we have lost the wonder of what happened on Calvary?

The resurrection of Christ was the event that accomplished salvation and verified Christ's victory over death. But it was the cross of Jesus Christ that showed us the grace of God. Everything God wants us to know about Himself comes together in those crossbeams. Picture Jesus stretched out against the sky. What's Jesus doing on the cross?

He's Substituting

Jesus lived on earth at a time of unrest in the nation of Israel. The Romans had conquered the land, and every day, Hebrew insurgents battled in the streets. With that background, we enter the story at Passover, Jewish culture's most celebrated time of year. Passover culminated in the governor releasing a prisoner of the people's choice to appease their anger and reduce their frustration with Roman occupation. This was Pilate's opportunity to avert the demands for Jesus' death by offering either Jesus or the notorious prisoner, Barabbas. But the crowd was determined to see Christ die.

Everyone knew the evil Barabbas had done. It is not stretching it to say that Jesus literally, physically, took the cross that had been reserved for Barabbas. To understand the gospel, you must first understand this idea of substitution. Jesus died first for Barabbas and then for every other human who has ever lived. I am in that line. You are too.

I deserve to die that death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. That's substitution.

He's Scandalizing

The cross is an outrageous offense. It doesn't matter from what vantage point you stand: The cross makes scandalous claims that cause intense reactions.

The Jews, rejecting Christ, called out for His crucifixion, the most shameful, painful, awful death a person could experience. And they wanted it for Jesus. The dictionary defines a *scandal* as that which causes a public outcry and produces an expression of malicious sentiment. The cross of Jesus has always been a scandal.

Why the irrational hatred of Jesus? Why the illogical animosity toward our Lord? There's a battle going on as Satan incites hatred against the cross of Christ. Few are neutral in this battle; most are firmly entrenched. When you express to others the message of the cross, you're going to experience this scandalizing hatred.

What's Jesus doing on that cross? He's fighting for the souls of men. Hear the soldiers laughing as the Savior gives His life for them. People still scream and mock the cross of Jesus. It's a scandal!



He's Suffering

First-century executions did not seek a quick, painless death or the preservation of dignity. They sought a torture that humiliated the victim. To fully appreciate the meaning of the cross of Christ, you have to comprehend the extent to which He suffered for our sin.

Though it is often our focus, the physical pain was the lesser issue in Jesus' suffering. Through endless, countless eons of time, Jesus had known only perfect unity with His Father. Now as He hung on the cross, He experienced total separation from that perfect unity. What finite mind can comprehend separating the inseparable?

Forsaken by the Father? If only Jesus were simply separated from the dark-hearted, pagan people screaming insults at Him. Or for Jesus to be abandoned by the disciples who followed at a distance. Certainly, that was painful, but He had an understanding of their weakness. But to be abandoned by the Father—nothing compares to that. That is the suffering of the cross.

He's Satisfying

The gospel of Jesus Christ is only a concept until we comprehend the way Jesus' death on the cross satisfied God's wrath.

The temple represented God's presence. God dwelt in unapproachable holiness behind an impenetrable curtain called the Holy of Holies. The curtain reminded everyone of the sin that separated man and God. Jesus died as an atoning sacrifice for sin. In the instant Jesus died, God Himself reached down and tore the veil in the temple from top to bottom.

Sin is now paid for. "The way is open," He declares. "Come into My presence. My Son has paid the price for your sin. Evil, sinful men can now approach holiness." Why? Because of the cross. Some people ask, "Why doesn't God do something about sin?" Newsflash: He did. All God's righteous hatred of all that sin from all human history was poured out upon Christ as He hung on that cross.

A holy God poured out His wrath on His innocent Son so that we could be forgiven. When Jesus said, "It is finished," God said, "Paid in full." Sin has been put away now. The cross of Jesus Christ satisfied the requirements of a holy God.

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GOD IS FAITHFUL



People sometimes break promises; God never does.

Ever been left with a broken promise?

- ▶ “I’ll pay you back tomorrow.”
- ▶ “The repairman will be at your house by 8:00.”
- ▶ “The doctor will see you shortly.”
- ▶ “I’ll always be there for you.”

Some broken promises can’t be avoided. After all, when we make promises we don’t know about traffic snarls or sudden illness. But whether the broken promise is a slight irritant—like forgetting to call a friend back—or a devastating blow—like a shattered marriage vow—when we experience enough broken promises, we may begin to question anyone’s ability to remain faithful to a promise. We can even lose hope.

Thankfully, God is not like us. God is always faithful—no matter what!

The reality of Jesus’ resurrection points to this great truth. By raising Jesus from the dead, God showed He makes the impossible possible. Nothing prevents Him from keeping His promise to us. God is faithful and will always do what He says. Jesus told us He would rise from the dead—and He did!

Let’s look at the resurrection of Jesus—that first day when Jesus came out of the tomb—and discover how we can have hope because God is faithful.



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SPECIAL FOCUS

GOD IS FAITHFUL



What surprise ending has left you wondering, "How did that happen?"

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

The empty tomb points to the faithfulness of God.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Skeptics often question the resurrection of Christ. But those who have objectively looked into it come away with a different conclusion.

- ▶ “I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.” –Thomas Arnold, Oxford University.¹
- ▶ Harvard Law School professor, Dr. Simon Greenleaf, mocked Christians in his classroom until some challenged him to put the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus through the filter of the law. He took up the challenge and found the evidence so convincing he concluded the resurrection of Jesus is one of the most well-established facts of history.²

The evidence points to the resurrection of Jesus as a verifiable historical fact. This evidence also tells us something about God, the One who raised Jesus from the dead. Skeptics were present on that first morning of Jesus’ resurrection, but God’s faithfulness was also present.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Luke 24:1-3

¹ On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

At the beginning of Luke 24, resurrection was not on anyone's mind; they certainly weren't expecting it. Notice what the women were carrying as they came to the tomb: spices. These spices were not for cooking, however; they were to prepare their friend for His final burial.

The women were not expecting the stone to be rolled away from the tomb (see Mark 16:3-4); nor were they expecting the tomb to be empty. They knew they were at the right place. They had seen Jesus' body placed there. (See 15:47.) But now, on the morning of the third day, they walked in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. We should not be surprised they were "wondering" (Luke 24:4), since they didn't find what they expected to find.

No one just walks out of a tomb. It's impossible. But God makes the impossible possible.

If God were like us, His faithfulness would be limited by His ability. God could not be faithful to what He has said He will do if His ability, capacity, and power had limits or restrictions. But the empty tomb proves that God is not like us. Nothing restricts God in His ability and power to deliver, to do whatever He chooses to do. He makes the impossible possible.

God stepped into our time and space and made the impossible possible by raising Jesus from the dead. That changes everything. Since God could raise Jesus to life, He can do other seemingly impossible things: remove our sin and give us a new life that never ends.

What do you remember about your earliest encounters with the resurrection story?

QUESTION #2

Luke 24:4-8

⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.

⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”

⁸ Then they remembered his words.

The women were not left in their wondering state. Two men—angels (see Matt. 28:5)—appeared and asked a single question: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The men seemed almost incredulous about the women’s presence. *You’re looking for Jesus, but you’re looking in the wrong place on this Sunday morning.*

The men gave only one option for Jesus’ absence in this place of the dead. No one stole His body; nor did He revive from unconsciousness in the cool of the tomb. “He is not here; he has risen!”

This shouldn’t have been a surprise to the women. The Gospel writers had highlighted Jesus telling His followers these things.

- ▶ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death” (Matt. 20:18).
- ▶ “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this” (Mark 8:31-32).

We know the disciples were listening because on one occasion Peter reacted and even rebuked Jesus: “Never, Lord! ... This shall never

Why do we sometimes doubt or forget what God has promised?

QUESTION #3

happen to you!" (Matt. 16:22). On another occasion when Jesus told the disciples what was coming, "the disciples were filled with grief" (17:23). But God is faithful. The disciples could count on God's faithfulness to carry through with what He had promised.

Scripture records almost nine thousand promises from God. We can trust the One who extended these promises to us because the empty tomb means God's words and His promises are not empty. He does what He says He will do. The same faithful, powerful God who raised Jesus can take care of you.

The words spoken by these men jogged the memory of the women. "Then they remembered his words." On a Sunday morning that moments before had seemed so frightening, perplexing, and heartbreaking, these women realized the final, impossible promise from their Lord had come true. Jesus had risen from the dead!

Luke 24:9-12

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

What emotions come to the surface when you read this passage?

QUESTION #4



Rushing back to the others, “they told all these things” to Jesus’ other followers. Unfortunately, the women’s report did not have the same effect on the Eleven or on the other people gathered with them. “Their words seemed to them like nonsense.” They wrote it off as ridiculous, ludicrous, and inconceivable.

Consequently, “they did not believe.” “They” included the eleven remaining apostles, the ones who had walked closely with Jesus. These were Jesus’ closest friends, those who had spent the most time with Him. They heard *everything* He said, including the statements about His resurrection, yet in this moment, they were skeptics.

The empty tomb is proof positive—solid evidence that God is not bound by our unbelief. God did what He did because He is ultimately faithful to Himself. He does not have earthly limits, neither is He necessarily limited by our lack of faith. Faith is important, to be sure, but God can and sometimes will accomplish His plans and His purposes in spite of our unbelief or lack of faith. God is always faithful to Himself, His promises, and His purposes—and so you can believe He will always be faithful to you.

Peter was the apostle we often see saying or doing the wrong thing. But not this time. “Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb.” Instead of staying in doubt and unbelief, he got up and went to check it out for himself. He investigated. Peter chose to exercise what little faith he had left, and he found God to be faithful.

Let’s “retrain” our brains to think faith first. That means, no matter what happens, we maintain trust in our faithful God. Instead of doubting Him, we should immediately and automatically trust that God is in control—because He is.

If the resurrection didn’t happen—if Jesus didn’t really rise from the dead—then nothing in the Christian life matters. (See 1 Cor. 15:13-14.) But if the resurrection did happen—if the tomb is empty, and Jesus is alive—that changes everything. When we see the truth of the resurrection, our skepticism fades away as faith emerges. Fear is replaced with hope. We can trust in Jesus because He is alive. We have a heavenly Father who makes the impossible possible!

What are some possible responses to Jesus’ resurrection?

QUESTION #5

HE IS FAITHFUL

Circle the areas of life below where you've seen God's faithfulness. Then write a prayer of thanks to Him.

My health My finances My work My family
My education My relationships My hobbies My giving

MY PRAYER:

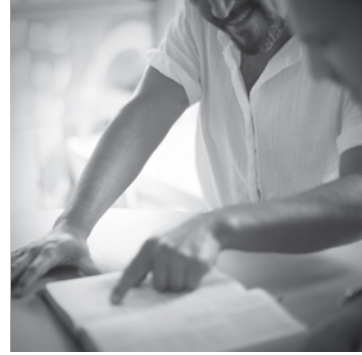
"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith!"

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:13-14

LIVE IT OUT

How will you respond to the faithfulness of God this week? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Believe.** Jesus invites you to follow Him. If you have never trusted in Christ, place your faith in Him. Talk to someone in your group about your desire to believe and trust in Christ.
- ▶ **Investigate.** If you still wonder if the resurrection of Jesus is something we can count on, look into it for yourself. Read a book such as *Risen Savior: The Search for Jesus' Tomb* by Charles Quarles or *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel.
- ▶ **Trust.** God is faithful to what He promised, and because of this, Jesus' tomb is empty. Since God can handle something so miraculous and powerful as raising someone from the dead, trust Him with the struggles you are facing. Turn your cares over to Him. Trust in the One who is eternally faithful.



It's okay to start out as skeptics, but we should be honest ones. And if we are, we'll find that the faithful God who has always been there for us, will be in the future.

My thoughts

1. Thomas Arnold, *Christian Life, Its Hopes, Its Fears, and Its Close*, 6th ed. (London: T. Fellowes, 1859), pp. 15-16.

2. "Harvard Law Professor Examines the Evidence of Jesus' Resurrection," *Y-Jesus: The Facts about Jesus Presented by Scholars*, March 28, 2017, <http://y-jesus.com/simon-greenleaf-resurrection>.