

“The Cross”

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Matthew 20:17–19 (ESV)

¹⁷ And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”¹

Last weekend, I was in the Dallas area visiting a friend. On Saturday, we were in Dallas and since we were so close, I decided that I had to see the place where JFK was shot. So we walked to Dealey Plaza, where there is a little X painted on Elm Street at the place where JFK was shot. The fact that a president was assassinated, and the fact that JFK’s assassination has inspired so many conspiracies, make JFK’s death one of the most infamous in recent history.

Here’s one of the more famous deaths of the twentieth century. Yet what did JFK’s death accomplish? I’m sure it had many consequences, but did it produce any good? Does any good come out of most deaths? Some deaths trigger very bad events. Like the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the archduke of Austria, which led to the start of World War I. Occasionally, a death can spur a movement. I think of the death of Emmett Till, a black teenager who was murdered by white men in Mississippi at the age of 14 in 1955, supposedly for flirting with a white woman. This murder spurred on the civil rights movement.

Yet most deaths are neither famous nor so influential. The vast majority of us will have quiet deaths, and our lives will soon be forgotten. This is the tragedy of death. It swallows up everything, including the memory of most people who have ever walked the earth.

As painful and wasteful and negative as death is, Christianity says the central event in history is a death. Of course, that’s the death of Jesus, who was crucified almost two thousand years ago just outside the city of Jerusalem. Jesus’ death doesn’t stand alone, of course. It was followed by his resurrection and later his ascension to heaven. But in Christianity, we celebrate a death because unlike any other death in history, Jesus’ death brings life. One of the strange but beautiful things about Christianity is that at the center of our faith is a story of how God was tortured and executed.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Today, I'll talk about Jesus' death on the cross. First, in order to understand how this event fits into big story of the Bible, I'm going to backtrack a bit and remind us of some things that we've already seen so far in our tour of the big story of the Bible. Second, I'll talk a bit about what Jesus said regarding his own death. Third, I'll talk about his death. And, fourth, I'll talk about what that means for us.

In the beginning, God created the world to be his temple, a theater for his glory (Gen.1:1-2:3). And he made humans to be his image bearers (Gen. 1:26-28) They were supposed to reflect God's glory to the rest of the world. They were supposed to relate to God like obedient, loving children. They were supposed to rule over the rest of the world by obeying God's word. And God warned those first humans, Adam and Eve, that if they disobeyed him, they would die (Gen. 2:17).

Of course, we know what happened next: Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They listened to the voice of the serpent, who is Satan, instead of the voice of God (Gen. 3:1-6). Satan told Eve that she wouldn't die if she disobeyed God, but the truth is that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they had a spiritual death. They were cut off from God's presence (Gen. 3:24). They were cut off from the tree of life, the source of eternal life. And eventually they had physical deaths.

Because of what Adam and Eve did, we all are born into a world of death. We are born spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3). And we all will die. As Paul says in Romans 5:12, "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."

Sin is rebellion against God. We were made to relate to God. In fact, all things exist for God. As Paul says in Romans 11:36, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." All things exist for God. But we often act as if all things exist for us. We often disregard God and do things according to our will, not his. I like how Pastor Michael Lawrence describes sin: "Sin is an attack on God's character, a denial of God's truth, an affront to his very being."²

Because sin is an attack on God, God is right to attack sin. The penalty for sin is death. Paul says that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). In other words, death is what we have earned for our sin. Toward the beginning of the book of Romans, Paul says "the wrath of God is

² Michael Lawrence, "Forsaken," in Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence, *It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 87.

revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). God must punish sin because it corrupts us. It destroys us. If you have lost a loved one to cancer, you are right to hate those cancer cells. Not all anger is wrong. We are angry when we see people we love commit themselves to self-destructive behavior. That’s really what sin is. And God has a plan to rid the world of the plague of sin. One way or another, his wrath will be poured out on all sin.

We have also seen in our tour of the Bible that God has poured out his wrath on sin in certain times and places. He did so when he destroyed the known world with a flood in Noah’s day (Gen. 6-8). Only eight people survived, because they alone trusted in God’s provision. And there are other stories of people who received God’s wrath: Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19); the plagues visited upon Egypt as well as the closing of the Red Sea on Pharaoh’s army (Exod. 7-14); the entrance into the Promised Land and the destruction of Israel’s enemies (Joshua); and even the judgment brought on Israel itself when it was unfaithful to God and started worshipping idols (2 Kgs. 17; 24-25).

There’s one other thing we need to consider before we start talking about Jesus’ death. In the Old Testament, God allowed his people to make sacrifices of animals for their sins, so that they wouldn’t be destroyed. Abraham was able to sacrifice a ram so that he didn’t have to kill his son (Gen. 22). During the tenth plague visited upon the land of Egypt, the Passover, Israelites had to slaughter lambs so that their firstborn children wouldn’t be destroyed (Exod. 12). And God gave the Israelites a system of animal sacrifice. The sins of the people of Israel were symbolically transferred to animals, who were killed (Leviticus). The principle is simple: sin deserves punishment, someone has to die for sin, and God graciously allowed substitutes to take the place of his people.

But the problem was that God’s people needed another human to take their place. They needed a human who could also be a once-and-for-all sacrifice for all their sins: past, present, and future. Yet no one human could do that. For a human to do that, he would need to be not just human, but also infinite, able to pay for the sins of a multitude, not just the sins of one other person.

Of course, the only person who could qualify to be savior of a multitude of others is Jesus. He is the God-man, God who took on human flesh. He is a man, but he also is God and is

therefore infinite: not bound by time and place. His death can cover all the sins of any who are united to him. His death can cleanse the sins of all who put their trust in him.

Of course, that's why Jesus became a man. He came to die for the sins of his people. We have already seen that when Mary was pregnant with Jesus, the angel Gabriel told Joseph that Mary "will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Jesus himself said, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

How does Jesus save his people? He does it by giving up his own life. In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus said he was a servant, and the way he would serve his people is by giving up his life to ransom them. A ransom was the price paid to free a slave or a prisoner of war. In religious contexts, the word also refers to covering over sin, or atoning for sin. A number of theologians believe Jesus was echoing the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53. In that famous chapter, we are told of a servant who:

"carried our sorrows" (v. 4),
"was wounded for our transgressions" (v. 5),
"was crushed for our iniquities" (v. 5),
was "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (v. 7)
"was cut off out of the land of the living" (v. 8),
"makes an offering for guilt" (v. 10),
will "make many to be accounted righteous" (v. 11),
"shall bear [his people's] iniquities" (v. 11),
"poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors" (v. 12),
"bore the sin of many" (v. 12),
and "makes intercession for the transgressors" (v. 12).

This is the language of substitution. Jesus is saying that he is this righteous servant who does things for his people. He takes on their sin so it can be punished, and so that his people can be accounted righteous. When the sins of his people are punished, his people are free.

Notice that in that verse, Jesus came to "give his life as a ransom for many." First, Jesus gave his life. He did this willingly, voluntarily (also John 10:11, 15, 17-18). Second, Jesus gives

his life as a ransom for *many*. He didn't die for everyone. His sacrificial death only applies to those who are united to him. Those who come to him in faith, who trust that he is who the Bible says he is and he did, does, and will do what the Bible says he did, does, and will do—these are the people who have been ransomed from their sin. All are invited to come to Jesus, but not all will come.

Jesus knew what he came to do. In fact, he predicted his death a few times. One of those times is at the moment of his transfiguration. This is when he took three of his disciples, Peter, John, and James, and brought them up on a mountain. These disciples were able to get a glimpse of Jesus' glory, just the way Moses was able to get a glimpse of God's glory at Mount Sinai. And, in fact, Moses appears there, along with Elijah. They represent the law and the prophets, and both men had talked to God at Mount Sinai, or Mount Horeb. In Luke's account of the transfiguration, we see that Jesus discusses his "departure" with Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:31). The Greek word used there is *exodos*.³ When Jesus died and rose from the grave, he began the true exodus. Remember that when the Israelites left Egypt, they were delivered from their captivity to the Egyptians. They had been slaves, but now they were free. But the true captivity began in Genesis 3. The true slavery we all experience is slavery to sin. And Jesus came to deliver his people out of that slavery.

Remember that in the exodus, lambs were slain so that the Israelites would be covered by their blood. Everyone whose door was covered with the blood of the lamb was "passed over" by God, who would destroy all the firstborn in homes that were not covered with blood. Again, this was a substitutionary sacrifice: All the Israelites, along with all humans, deserve to die for sin, but God let them sacrifice a lamb instead. But the lambs of the exodus, along with all the other animals sacrificed in the Old Testament, couldn't really atone for the sin of the people. As Hebrews 10:4 says, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Why? Because they are animals, and animals can't be substitutes for human beings. All of these lambs and bulls and other goats were foreshadows of the true sacrifice for sin: Jesus. That's why when John the Baptist first sees Jesus he says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

³ ἔξοδος.

In the three so-called “synoptic” Gospels,⁴ Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus very clearly predicted his death at least three times (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19 and the parallels found in Mark and Luke). Between those three predictions, Jesus told his disciples that he would: be delivered into the hands of the chief priests and scribes, who would condemn him to death; be delivered over to Gentiles who would mock, flog, and crucify him; die; and be raised on the third day.

Now I want to discuss Jesus’ death itself. And I want to do this by focusing on three scenes from Matthew’s Gospel. I want to talk briefly about the Last Supper, his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, and his death on the cross.

On the night when Jesus was arrested, he ate one last meal with his disciples. This was a Passover meal. At the Passover, which was held once every spring, Jews would eat lamb and bread and drink wine.⁵ Jesus took two of these elements and gave them new meaning. We find this in Matthew 26:26-29:

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

We’ve talked a bit about covenants in this sermon series. A few weeks ago, I mentioned the promise of a new covenant found in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, among other places in the prophets. Here, Jesus says that he is inaugurating that covenant. He will do it when he is crucified. He takes the bread and says, “this is my body.” Obviously, Jesus’ disciples would never confuse the bread with Jesus’ actual body, for both his body and the bread were right before their eyes. But the bread symbolized his body. The breaking of the bread reminds me of Isaiah 53:5, which says, “he was crushed for our iniquities.” Jesus takes the wine and says, “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Again, I

⁴ They are “syn-” (together) “optic” (see): that is, they generally see things the same way. Much of the material is shared (Mark is assumed to be the first Gospel written, with Matthew and Luke borrowing from Mark, while also using other unique sources available to them.) John’s Gospel is quite different.

⁵ The meal actually had six important elements. The Passover lamb reminded the Jews of the first Passover lamb and the blood that protected them. The unleavened bread reminded them of God’s swift deliverance. A bowl of salt water reminded them of tears shed in captivity. Bitter herbs reminded them of their years of slavery in Egypt. A fruit paste called *charosheth* reminded them of the clay used to make the bricks in Egypt. Finally, four cups of diluted wine reminded them of the promises of Exod. 6:6-7.

don't think any of the disciples would imagine that the wine was literally Jesus' blood. But the wine symbolized his blood, his life, and it was his life that would be given for the sins of many. This reminds me of Isaiah 53:12: "he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercessions for the transgressors."

Jesus' death opened up the new covenant. The new covenant promises many things: Members of this covenant will all know God; they will have his law written on their hearts; they will have the Holy Spirit inside of them; and they will be forgiven for their sins. All of this is possible because Jesus died.

Shortly after Jesus celebrates this meal with his disciples, he took his three closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, and went to a place called Gethsemane to pray. We find this scene in Matthew 26:36-42:

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."

I read this passage to point out something significant. Clearly, Jesus does not want to die. He's sorrowful, and he asks the Father if it's possible for him not to die. But he knows that the Father's plan must be carried out, so he says, "your will be done." I don't think that there's any coincidence that this takes place in the garden of Gethsemane, and that the word "temptation" is used. Jesus is tempted in a garden, but he does not give in to his desire not to die. He was unlike Adam, who gave into temptation in the garden. In this way, as in his temptation by Satan in the wilderness, Jesus shows that he succeeds where Adam failed. He is obedient to the Father, even unto the point of death (Phil. 2:8).

Now let's move on to Jesus' death. If you're not familiar with the story, you may not know why Jesus died. After all, he was completely obedient. He never sinned. He never did anything wrong. Why should the only completely innocent person have to die?

Well, there are a lot of reasons.⁶ One, the religious leaders in Jerusalem were jealous of Jesus and the attention he received (Mark 11:18). They also thought he was committing blasphemy by claiming to be equal to God (John 5:18; 8:58-59; 10:30-31). Two, Jesus was betrayed into the hands of these Jewish religious leaders by one of his disciples, Judas. We're told that Satan entered into Judas (Luke 22:3-6). So Judas arranged to have Jesus arrested in private, away from the crowds of Jerusalem (Matt. 26:3-5, 14-15). Three, we can say Satan was responsible for Jesus' death, because he was behind Judas's actions. Four, Jesus was literally killed by the Roman Empire. The Jewish leaders didn't have the authority to put someone to death, but the Roman leaders, under the governor, Pontius Pilate, did. So the Jews brought Jesus to Pilate. Pilate didn't really want to have Jesus killed, because he could see that Jesus had done nothing wrong. But Pilate's job was to maintain order in Jerusalem, and it was easier to kill one man in order to calm the frenzied crowds than it was to pursue truth and justice. So the Roman soldiers carried out the crucifixion. Five, all along, this was God's plan to redeem his people. When I say "God," I don't just mean the Father. I mean the three Persons of the Trinity. This was the plan of the Father and the Son (and presumably the Holy Spirit, since they are one). This was the way that God designed to both punish sin and rescue his people. That way, God is just and the justifier of sinners like you and me (Rom. 3:26). And, six, we might say that we are responsible for Jesus' death. "We" includes all of humanity. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), which necessitated Jesus' death on the cross. So, in a sense, you could say we're all responsible for Jesus' death.

I would like to now read a long section of Matthew 27 that describes Jesus' death. I'll pause along the way to describe a few things. I'll begin in verse 27:

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. ²⁸ And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

⁶ For more on Jesus' death, see my sermon "Jesus Died," preached on April 3, 2015 and available at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus. Of course, they didn't believe Jesus was a real king. They beat him. This fulfills what we find in Isaiah 50:6:

I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

Let's continue reading, beginning in verse 32:

³² As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. ³⁶ Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." ³⁸ Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁹ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." ⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.' " ⁴⁴ And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

I should say something about crucifixion here. This was one of the most brutal ways ever devised to kill someone. The Roman Empire reserved this method of torture and death for people who were not citizens of the Empire. It was usually used for insurrectionists, people who revolted against Roman rule. Crucifixion was so shocking that it wasn't something you would talk about in polite society. Jesus was treated like the worst of criminals.

The official charge against Jesus is that he claimed to be King of the Jews, which was a threat to the Roman Empire. But the truth is that Jesus is the king, and not just of the Jews. This is one of many levels of irony in the story. Here's something else that's ironic: Jesus had the power to save himself, despite what the mockers say. But if Jesus saved himself, he couldn't save others. He had to die to save his people. What really held him to that cross were not the nails, but his desire to do the Father's will and to pay the penalty for the sins of his people.

In a moment, I'm going to mention Psalm 22, which is a Psalm of David, written approximately a thousand years earlier, that Jesus fulfills. We see various details in that Psalm being fulfilled by Jesus. Psalm 22:16-18 says,

- ¹⁶ For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
¹⁷ I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
¹⁸ they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.

That leads us to the next passage, beginning with verse 45:

⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.”
⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

In the middle of the day, at noon, there is darkness over the land for three hours. Darkness has a great deal of theological meaning. Remember the ninth plague, the one before the Passover? Darkness covered Egypt for three days (Exod. 10:21-23). Also in the Old Testament, the prophets wrote of a coming “day of the LORD,” a day of salvation and judgment. We find passages like this:

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (Joel 2:31)

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:20)

“And on that day,” declares the Lord GOD,
“I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.” (Amos 8:9)⁷

The darkness indicates that God's judgment came down on Jesus. The righteous wrath of God was being poured out on Jesus.

⁷ See also Isa. 13:9-10.

It's hard to know what Jesus endured on the cross. There was great physical pain, of course. But others have experienced as much physical pain. Sometimes, people who were crucified took days to die. Jesus died within a matter of hours. But no one has experienced greater spiritual and psychological pain on earth than Jesus.

Think about it: prior to this time, Jesus had experienced unbroken fellowship with the Father for all eternity. There was an unbroken, loving relationship between the Father and the Son. And now the Son has to bear the Father's punishment for all the sins of his people. Again, the Son agreed to take this punishment upon himself willingly.

Now think of this: I don't know how many people in all of history have truly had faith in the one, true, living God. But Jesus bore the sins of all of God's people, from Old Testament saints like Abraham, Moses, and David, to all Christians. Surely, that's millions and millions of people. Jesus bore the punishment that all their sins deserved. All the lies, the murders, the infidelity, the idolatry, stealing, selfishness, pride, laziness—Jesus bore it all for all of God's people for all time. All of that sin, compressed and put on one man, who became sin so that his people could be considered righteous in God's eyes (2 Cor. 5:21). We can only imagine what that felt like.

The best way that we can think about this is to say that on the cross, Jesus truly endured hell on earth. Hell is being cut off from God forever. On the cross, Jesus experienced what it was like to be cut off from the Father. It's hard to fathom what he endured. But he received on the cross what we deserve.

In the midst of this pain, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Clearly, people didn't understand what he was saying. Jesus must have felt forsaken in the midst of what he was enduring. But he was actually quoting the first verse of Psalm 22. I would encourage you to read that Psalm later today. You'll see the pain that David wrote about, the pain that Jesus endured. That pain was real, no doubt. But even in the midst of that pain, the Psalm expresses great faith in God. The Psalmist says, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" (v. 22). He says that God hears the cries of the afflicted. He trusts that,

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.

²⁸ For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

²⁹ All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.

³⁰ Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;

³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,
that he has done it.

I think Jesus quoted Psalm 22 to indicate both the pain he endured on the cross, and also the hope that he would be vindicated. Jesus was forsaken on the cross so that we don't have to be forsaken by God.

When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn. We see that in verse 51. I think this means that God's presence was no longer confined to the temple. Or, to put it in different terms, Jesus opened up the way back to God's presence. He opened up the way to the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve were removed from the garden, which is described in temple-like terms in Genesis 2, cherubim were placed at the entrance, guarding it with a flaming sword. In Solomon's temple, the curtain of the temple had cherubim embroidered on it (2 Chron. 3:14). Jesus took the sword for us, so that we could enter into God's presence.

I don't think it's an accident that the apostle Peter, in both the book of Acts and in the first letter that bears his name, calls the cross a "tree" (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Pet. 2:24). He's probably referring back to a passage in Deuteronomy that says a that man who was put to death for a crime and hanged on a tree is cursed by God (Deut. 21:22-23). The apostle Paul quotes this verse in Galatians 3:13 to say that Jesus took the curse for us. But the "tree" that is the cross, a tree of torture and death, becomes a tree of life for God's people. The Bible begins and ends with mentions of a tree of life (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2). And in the middle stands the cross, a "tree" which grants people access to God.

There's a lot more I could say about Jesus' death. I'll say more about it in two and a half months, as we approach Easter. But for now, I would say this: The cross shows how serious our rebellion against God is. It shows us what needs to happen if our sin is to be forgiven. It shows the extent to which Jesus went in order to save his people. It shows us what kind of God we have. We have a God who became man and endured great suffering, in order to win back his people. Another apostle, John writes:

⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

All who have put their trust in Jesus and repent of their sins experience this love of God. They can rest assured knowing that through Jesus' death on the cross, they are forgiven. The sins of all God's people have been nailed to the cross (Col. 2:13-14).

I think the cross also shows that our sin has to die. This self-destructive power that wreaks havoc in the world and in our selves. That's why we are told to "put to death" our old ways. Paul writes, in Colossians 3:5-8:

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Let me end this way. My prayer for us all is that we put to death our old ways this year. And if you have not turned from your sin and turned to Jesus, do so today. You're not a Christian because you go to church, or because you were baptized, or because you prayed a prayer, or because you believe the right doctrines, or because you "asked Jesus into your heart." You are a Christian if God has transformed you, causing you to be born again. You are a Christian if you have come to an end of yourself and said, "I'm not God. I can't save myself. My only hope is Jesus." If you come to Jesus, put your trust in him, and start putting to death your old self, you will never be forsaken by God.