THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Galatians 1:4; 2:20; 5:24; 6:14

Key Verse: 2:20

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Easter is resurrection, so to prepare for it, for the past three weeks we’ve been studying 1 Corinthians 15, which is all about the resurrection of the body. Jesus rose to break the power of sin and death and open the way to God’s kingdom. One day he’ll come back, give us a resurrection body like his, and we’ll share his victory and glory forever. The last two nights we’ve also had a great time listening to each other’s faith journeys. We’ve realized how gracious God is who’s called us into fellowship with one another through our Lord Jesus Christ, to belong to and love one another as one body, and to honor one another above ourselves (Ro12:4–5,10,12–13,27; 1Co1:9; Eph4:2,25; 1Jn1:3,6–7; 4:11–12).

Now on Easter Sunday, we’re actually going to go backwards to think about what the death of Jesus means. To do this, we usually look at one of the famous Gospel accounts. But this year we’re going to look in a rather unusual place, in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In this letter Paul says many things hard to understand. But in the midst of it all he refers to the death of Jesus remarkably often—at least 13 times. Paul explains in this letter how the cross of Christ is relevant to our real lives. Generally, through the cross we receive “the grace of Christ” (1:6) and “freedom in Christ” (2:4; 5:1); we become children of God (3:26; 4:5) and receive his Spirit (3:2). And we’d all like to think only about grace and forgiveness and freedom and stop there. But the cross of Christ means so much more. In six places in this letter Paul delves deeper into what the cross of Christ means. May God open our hearts to his living word today.

**First**, he “gave himself…to rescue us.” Let’s read 1:3–4. Here Paul says Jesus “gave himself,” referring to his death on the cross. This expression “he gave himself” tells us that the cross isn’t just a symbol or a theological idea. It’s about a person and what he did there. Jesus, the Son of God, went to a cross and there, it says, he gave himself for our sins. What does it mean? It means he bore all the punishment our sins deserve. He gave his life in exchange for ours. He was the perfect sacrifice. Paul also says in 1:4 that Jesus gave himself “to rescue us from the present evil age…” In Greek, the word “rescue” is literally “to pluck out.” It’s like being plucked out of fire. The word “rescue” means we couldn’t save ourselves from the present evil age—we surely would’ve been devoured and burned alive in it. Jesus went to the cross to rescue us. There he sacrificed his own life so that we might escape the present evil age.

When we accept what he did for us, we respond with the greatest gratitude and loyalty to him. Has your life ever been literally rescued? Ten years before I was born, when my oldest sister was a baby, in the middle of the night there was a terrible fire in the house. My mom was a 22-year-old mother frantically looking for her two children. She snatched her toddler son and ran out of the house. Then she remembered her baby daughter still in the crib. By this time, the house was burning and filled with smoke, but my mom went to the large picture widow of the living room, used her foot to kick it in and break it open, went through the broken window back into the burning, smoke-filled house and brought her baby girl out. Sadly, someone else in the house died that night. When my sister was older, she heard about how my mom rescued her from that burning house. Because she knew my mom risked her own life to rescue her, she always had a special love for her. This is how we all should be responding to what Jesus did for us. If we don’t appreciate what he did for us on the cross, that he gave himself to rescue us, we’re kind of heartless and ignorant. But if we do appreciate what he did for us on the cross, we’re forever grateful and loyal.

**Second**, “crucified with Christ.” Now let’s read 2:20. This verse is like a hidden gem. In it Paul shares personally how the cross of Christ impacted his own life. But he’s not just talking about himself; he’s sharing his own story as an example. The first thing he says here is that he’s been “crucified with Christ.” He doesn’t say he did it to himself, or that other people did it to him; he uses the passive voice: “I have been.” Who did it? It seems God did this to Paul. God convicted him of his stubborn self-righteousness, pride, and seeking his own glory. God broke him down until he realized that he was actually an enemy of God living in rebellion against him, and that he deserved God’s wrath. When Paul repented and believed that Christ died for his sins, God crucified Paul with Christ. Paul writes in Romans 6:6: “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin…” Here, “our old self” describes our sinful state before we accepted the cross of Christ. Our old self is our sinful nature, or our “flesh.” To be crucified with Christ means, in a profound way, that our old self was crucified with him. Our bodies used to be ruled by sin, but after accepting the cross of Christ, that’s done away with. Being crucified with Christ is a victory God gave us in Christ, even before we’ve fully changed. We’ve died to sin; to get started in Christian life, we have to believe that (Ro6:2,11).

“Crucified with Christ” also has a positive meaning—not just escaping my own sins. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” Being “crucified with Christ” means identifying with what he did on the cross. It was his ultimate act of love for his Father God. He was willing to through even the pain and shame of the cross to obey the will of his Father God. Being “crucified with Christ” means making his purpose and spirit our very own. Most of us by nature avoid suffering. We want life to be free and easy and to feel good. We become experts at cleverly avoiding suffering. But if we’ve been “crucified with Christ,” we’re actually eager to participate in his sufferings and even to become like him in his death. Like Christ on the cross, we’re willing to suffer anything if only we obey God’s will. Like Christ, this becomes our passion in life.

Next, Paul says, “I no longer live.” What does he mean? Of course, when he wrote this he was very much alive. But he “no longer lived” in the sense that he was no longer living for himself. In 2 Corinthians 5:15 he writes: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” “I no longer live” means that after accepting the cross of Christ, Paul began living not for self but for Jesus. It was change at the deepest, most fundamental level, a change in his life purpose. Naturally we all live for ourselves. Even if we live for our families or loved ones, it’s really an extension of ourselves. Underneath it all, we human beings are fundamentally egoistic—living for our own honor, glory and pride. But when we accept the cross of Christ, we actually start living for Christ. Christ actually becomes the center of our lives. We love him most and want him to be honored and glorified above all.

After accepting the cross of Christ, Paul could say, “Christ lives in me.” It’s another profound and amazing statement. It could happen only after he was crucified with Christ—after he was deeply convicted of his sinfulness, pride, self-righteousness and self-centeredness. Beforehand, he was too full of himself. But afterwards, through a painful process of dying to self, there was room within him for Christ to dwell. Helping people spiritually is helping them through this painful process to have room within them for Christ to dwell (Gal4:19).

But how does Christ really come to live within us? It’s when the Spirit of Christ is living in us (Ro8:9–10). Ephesians 3:17a says that Christ dwells “in your hearts through faith.” The Bible says we should examine ourselves to see if we have this faith that Christ is in us (2Co13:5). In Colossians 1:27 Paul calls it the “mystery” of “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Christ in us gives us the hope of glory in our hearts. In Colossians 3:3 Paul explains, “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” This verse tells us that when Christ is in us, we have a personal relationship with God.

Now that Paul was crucified with Christ and no longer lived, he says, “The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God…” What does it mean? There is so much to say about what it means to live by faith in the Son of God. It affects every part of our lives. For Paul it meant he no longer depended on himself; now he depended on Jesus, the Son of God. After accepting the cross of Christ, Christ alone was his righteousness. And every day, in the midst of all the demands of his life and ministry, he came to Christ by faith for his grace and strength to do all things (Php4:13). This is living by faith in the Son of God.

In the last part of verse 20 Paul wrote so beautifully: “…who loved me and gave himself for me.” The cross of Christ is not just about some legal or theological transaction. As we saw in 1:4, it’s something very personal. There, Paul said that Christ “gave himself for our sins.” Here, he says he “gave himself for me.” Accepting the cross of Christ means accepting that Jesus sacrificed his own life for me, that he did it out of love even for me. He would have done it even if I were the only person. Christian life begins when we accept this love. We need to be fully convinced that he loves me. We all need love, but usually we’re too proud to admit it. We go through life acting self-sufficient but inwardly looking for love, real love, perfect love. Sad to say, we’re never really satisfied. Jesus once said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn15:13). Sometimes it may seem like we totally have no friends. But Jesus became our true friend, our best friend, when he laid down his life for us. When we sure of what he did for us on the cross, our souls are truly satisfied. We’re no longer needy, thirsty for people to love us; rather, we give his love.

**Third**, he “redeemed us from the curse.” Let’s read 3:13. This is another meaning of the cross of Christ—Jesus died on the cross to redeem us from the curse of the law. What’s that? Back in 3:10 Paul explained: “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’” Here the word “curse” can also mean “condemn” or “self-loathing.” Once in a while, for a few seconds, we might be fulfilling God’s law, but most of the time, we’re not. When we’re not fulfilling God’s law, in the back of our minds we condemn ourselves and hate ourselves. To be under a curse means to feel trapped and hopeless, with no way out. Many people live with this hidden sentiment about themselves. But when he was hung on the cross, Christ became a curse for us. Christ took all the curse and condemnation of our sins in his own body. It was to set us free from any kind of curse or condemnation. It was to redeem us and make us God’s precious children. So Paul wrote in Romans 8:1, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus…”

**Fourth**, we “crucify our flesh.” Read 5:24. This is the part about the cross of Christ that people can misinterpret and get strange about. They think crucifying the flesh means that anything to do with the human body is evil, and that we all should be mutilating our bodies and punishing ourselves constantly. But here, “flesh” means our sinful nature. It’s vivid way of depicting our sinful passions and desires. After accepting the cross of Christ, Paul said back in 2:20 that we’ve been “crucified with Christ.” But here he also says that we “have crucified our flesh with its passions and desires.” These aren’t just the normal desires to eat, sleep and mate. Paul describes them precisely in 5:19–21: “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like.” These are things in our lives that, after accepting the cross of Christ, we need to continue to crucify. Colossians 3:5 says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (cf. Ro8:13). As those who belong to Christ, we especially should be wary of living in passionate lust. Instead, we need to learn how to control our own body in a way that is holy and honorable (1Th4:4). We can’t crucify our flesh with our own willpower; we need the Spirit’s help to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Ro8:13). Accepting the cross of Christ means our lives need to be marked by denying ourselves, taking up our own cross daily and following Jesus (Lk9:23).

**Fifth**, “the offense of the cross.” In 5:11 Paul mentions “the offense of the cross.” In 6:12 he puts it another way, saying that some people want to “avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.” Clearly, when we accept the cross of Christ, there is an offense to some people. The cross offends some people because they’re trying to be righteous on their own. Others are offended because the cross goes against the grain of living for self and for sinful pleasure. When we accept the cross of Christ, we’ve got to come to terms with accepting that there’s an offense that goes along with it, and that we’re likely to be persecuted.

**Sixth**, “crucified to the world.” Let’s read 6:14. This is Paul’s final confession of what the cross of Christ meant to him. It changed him in two ways. He stopped boasting. And, similarly, he was crucified to the world. Boasting is really the lingua franca of the world. People are always boasting about what they have or do. Before he accepted the cross of Christ Paul boasted in his own righteousness and Jewish pedigree. But after accepting the cross of Christ, Paul began to boast only in the cross of Christ—not in what he did, but in what Jesus had done for him. He found surpassing worth in his cross (Php3). He also had been crucified to the world. The world no longer had a pull on him. Some people are easily swayed. When they’re with Christians, they go along with everything. Then, when they’re with people in the world who have no faith, they go along with them. But if we really accept the cross of Christ, we no longer follow the ideas or standards of the world, and we no longer love praise from people.

Accepting the good news of the new life, joy and victory of the resurrection also means accepting the cross. Paul believed the resurrection, but the cross was central to his life in this world. Today we learned that to accept the cross of Christ means to be most grateful to him, for he rescued our lives. To accept his cross also means to to crucify our sinful passions and desires, to embrace the offense of the cross, to learn to boast only in the cross, and to be crucified to the world. Above all, to accept his cross means to be crucified with Christ, to share his passion, to have Christ himself living in us, and to be sure of his love.