

Artful, but simple; compact, but loaded; sound, but fresh. This book is a jewel. Some passages sing. It well repays the time it takes to read it. And it's small enough to share often.

Mark Dever

Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC

The cross is the center of the Christian life and message. Any time we think of Christ we think of the cross. But what does it mean? And how does that apply to our lives? This little book will help explain that to interested readers.

Joshua W. Moody

Author of *Journey to Joy*, Senior Pastor of College Church
Wheaton, Illinois

The crucifixion of Jesus – an insignificant event or the epicenter of history? Dr. Ryken in his striking exploration of this question shows the many facets of the Bible's teaching on the cross. Jesus' identity and mission shine out clearly. This book will be interesting and helpful for Christians and non-Christians alike.

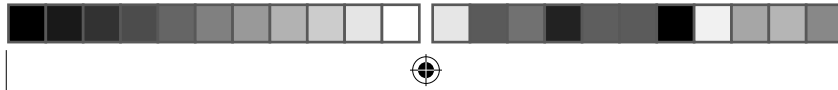
W. Robert Godfrey

President and Professor of Church History
Westminster Seminary
Escondido, California

The message of the cross has many features that are culturally distant to every generation. It is also so profound that believers will keep discovering rich new levels of truth about it as long they live. Therefore we need to regularly reflect on the cross. This book is an excellent aid to such reflection because it presents deep and profound insights into the cross written in a spiritually enriching way. It is also a good book to give as an introduction to the cross to one unfamiliar with its message.

Ajith Fernando

Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka



As practical as it is profound, *Salvation by Crucifixion* explains why the cross is at the heart of the Christian faith, and exalts the Christ who willingly ascended that cross to secure salvation for His people. It is a book that will encourage the believer and challenge the unbeliever as it displays the nature of God's redeeming love.

Robert Norris

Senior Pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church
Bethesda, Maryland

Phil Ryken's book brings us to our knees before the Lamb that was slain. He shocks us, challenges us, and comforts us with Christ crucified. Whether you are new to Christianity or a mature believer, there is no better place to be than at the foot of the cross. Read this book slowly, prayerfully, meditatively, and let its amazing truths penetrate the depth of your soul.

Joel R. Beeke

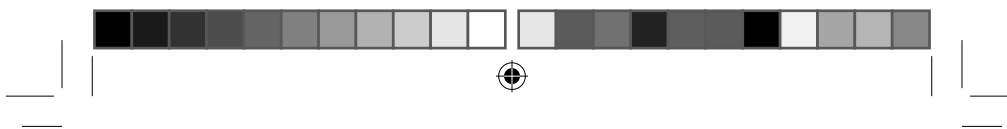
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Perfect for a thoughtful person who wants to know Christ and discover what it means to trust in Him.

Get this book and give it away (OR Get two and give one away).

Colin S. Smith

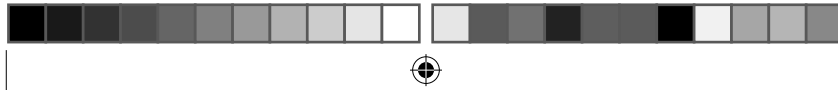
Senior Pastor, The Orchard Evangelical Free Church
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Arlington, Illinois



SALVATION
BY
CRUCIFIXION

PHILIP G. RYKEN

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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Introduction



This little book explains why the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the most important event in human history.

Sometime during or near the year 33 A.D. Jesus of Nazareth was arrested, tried, condemned, and crucified. These events took place under the authority of Pontius Pilate, who served as Prefect of Judea under the Roman Emperor Tiberius. By Pilate's sentence, Jesus was taken outside Jerusalem, nailed to a wooden post, and left to die.

The significance of this brutal execution goes far beyond its immediate cultural context. The full meaning of the cross depends partly



on the unique identity of Jesus Christ, whom the Bible presents *both* as a real human being *and* as the truly divine Son of God. Jesus is not merely a man, but at one and the same time also God—humanity and deity in a single person. This makes His death unprecedented: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the death of someone perfect and divine.

The implications of the crucifixion must also be understood in the context of the Old Testament. These sacred scriptures revealed that humanity had fallen into sin and thus had become alienated from God. Because the just penalty for sin was death, the only way to be forgiven and therefore reconciled to God was through offering sacrifices—specifically, bloody sacrifices of perfect animals. Yet there were prophecies that eventually a single sacrifice would atone for sin once and for all, as well as hints that this would be the sacrifice of a human being, not merely a bull, or sheep, or goat.

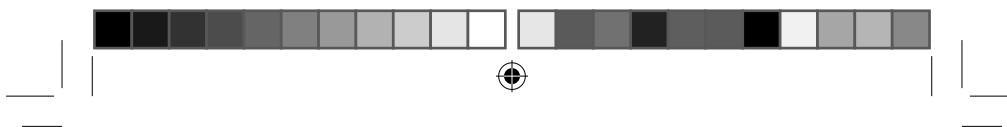
The death of Jesus on a cross—His execution by crucifixion—fulfilled the ancient promises by providing a permanent sacrifice for sin that reconciled humanity to God. There is forgiveness for anyone who places personal trust in Jesus Christ and His cross. This means



something more than simply believing that Christ was crucified, which after all is an indisputable fact of history. Not only is the crucifixion plainly recorded in the biblical gospels, but it is also confirmed in the Jewish *Talmud*, the *Annals* of the Roman historian Tacitus, and elsewhere. Believing that Christ was crucified is not a religious commitment, therefore, but a simple recognition of a historical fact.

The meaning of the cross goes much further, however. The Bible teaches a message of salvation by crucifixion. In addition to standing as a culminating event in the life story of Jesus of Nazareth, the cross provided a perfect payment of the death penalty that sin deserves. We know that this payment was accepted by God because the crucifixion was followed by the resurrection—by Jesus coming back to everlasting life on the third day. This miracle proved that humanity was indeed reconciled to God and opened the only door to never-ending life, which God will give to anyone who has faith in Jesus.

If this is true, then it is the most important truth ever told. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ give humanity hope that there is an answer to the fatal problem of death. But is this message true?



Why is it true? How can it be true? And if it is true, what difference does it make for my life? These are some of the questions that this little book hopes to answer.





1 The Necessity of the Cross

*“This man was handed over to you by God’s
set purpose and foreknowledge.”*

ACTS 2:23



Christianity is all about the cross. By cross is meant the wooden post upon which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. This was a standard means of execution in Roman times. Two wooden beams were nailed together in the shape of a cross or a T. The wrists and ankles of the victim were nailed to the wood, which was then slotted into the ground. There the man hung until he died.

The cross has always been the central symbol of Christianity. When archaeologists dig through the ruins of antiquity, they have one certain way to identify a place of Christian worship. They look for a cross. When they



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find it painted on a wall, carved into stone, or even worked into a floor plan, they know that they have found a church.

Since the beginning, Christians have identified themselves with the cross on which Jesus died. It is the chief symbol and defining reality of Christian faith.

NO LONGER NECESSARY?

Unfortunately, the cross is not as important as it used to be. At least, that is what leading thinkers are saying about the contemporary church. George Lindbeck, who taught theology at Yale, thinks that the cross has become a dead symbol: "A void has opened in the heart of Western Christianity. Where the cross once stood is now a vacuum."¹

Not that the cross has disappeared altogether, of course. Not yet, anyway. It still stands atop church steeples. It appears on church letterheads. It is stamped into Bible covers and even breath-mints at the local Christian bookstore. It dangles from post-modern ears. Yet, the cross of Christ is no longer a living reality for the people of God.

1. George Lindbeck, "Justification and Atonement: An Ecumenical Trajectory," unpublished paper, pp. 45-46.

At an infamous theology conference in the early 1990s, one speaker objected to Christianity's seeming obsession with the cross. "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff," the speaker said. In other words, who needs the cross?

It is true that there is something unsightly, even grotesque, about crucifixion. The Bible does not overlook this horror. Concerning Jesus, the prophet Isaiah said, "Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised" (Isa. 53:3). The cross is as unsightly as it is unpopular. But it is still necessary. Wherever the cross disappears, true religion disappears, for there is no Christianity without the cross.

NECESSARY TO FULFILL GOD'S PLAN

Why is the cross of Christ essential to Christianity? For several reasons. First, the cross was necessary to fulfill God's eternal plan.

There was a time when Jesus Himself wondered if the cross was truly necessary. It was the night He went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew that His enemies were closing in on Him. In fact, later the same

night He would be betrayed, arrested, and sentenced to death.

Jesus knew that the end was near. Like any human being, He was horrified by the prospect of death. Although Jesus is God, He is also a human being. As a human being, He wondered if it was necessary for Him to die such a painful death. Considering what it would be like to be crucified, He said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.’ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me’” (Matt. 26:38-39). Jesus was asking His Father if there was any way He could save His people without being crucified.

Yet because it was an essential part of His plan, God the Father did not spare God the Son from the cross. Jesus explained this after He was crucified and had come back to life. He spoke with two of His disciples, who were puzzled by what had happened to Him. They did not understand why Jesus died on a cross. He answered, “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things?” (Luke 24:26). According to God’s eternal plan, the cross of Christ was inevitable.

Christians, therefore, have always believed and taught the necessity of the cross. Not long

after Jesus returned to heaven, His friend Peter preached to the people of Jerusalem. He said: “This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). God knew about the crucifixion of His Son even before it happened. He not only knew about it, but He also permitted it. He not only permitted it, but He also purposed it. The cross was essential to His plan for humanity.

This is worth remembering whenever it seems as if God doesn’t know what He is doing. The trials and tragedies of life are often puzzling. Does God know what is happening in my life? Does He care? Can He do anything about it? The answer is that God does know and does care. And if you trust Him, He will do something about it.

The cross of Christ proves that God’s plans are good. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the most evil deed ever committed on this planet. God’s own perfect Son was put to death by wicked men. What could be more evil than that? At the same time, however, the crucifixion of Jesus was the best thing that ever happened on this planet. As we shall see, the cross has brought salvation to the

world. If God brought the greatest good out of the greatest evil, then He can bring good out of what seems to be evil in our own lives. It is all part of God's good plan.

NECESSARY TO PAY FOR SIN

What made crucifixion part of God's plan in the first place? Why was the cross necessary? What was it necessary for?

The cross was part of God's plan because it was the only way to save human beings from their sins. In the words of John Owen (1616-1683), the great Puritan and Oxford theologian, "There is no death of sin without the death of Christ."² Understanding sin, therefore, is part of understanding the cross.

What *is* sin? The answer is twofold. Sin is: (1) doing anything God forbids, or (2) failing to do anything God requires.

First, sin means doing what God forbids, as stipulated in Scripture. Whenever we curse God, tell a small untruth, steal office supplies, or strike out at someone in anger, we commit a sin. We have broken God's commandment against cursing, lying, stealing, or murder.

2. See John Owen's profound work *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1959).

Second, sin also includes not doing what the Word of God requires. God wants people to worship Him, to put others before themselves, to care for the sick and give to the poor. With these requirements it is worth asking, "What have I done for God lately?" If the answer is "Not very much," then we are sinning by not doing what God requires.

The reason sin is a problem is because God is holy. God is so perfectly holy that it is impossible for any sinful human being to stand before Him. Sin brings us under divine judgment. We deserve to be cursed and damned for our sins.

This is why Christ's death on the cross was such a necessary part of God's plan. God wanted to save His people from their sins. But how could He deal with this sin without sacrificing either His love or His holiness? This was the problem.

God could not simply overlook our sins. This might have been loving, but it would not have been holy. Justice would not have been served. Our sins would not have been paid for. Nor did God simply condemn us to die for our own sins, which would have been holy, but would not have fully demonstrated God's love.

The place where God's love and God's holiness embrace is at the cross. God the Father sent His Son, His only Son, to suffer and to die for our sins. His life for our life, His pain for our gain: here is the love of God. And here also, in the cross, is the holiness of God. The death penalty is executed against sin. The sins of God's people are paid in full.

The cross of Christ is necessary to preserve both God's love and God's holiness in the salvation of God's people. The German theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966) explained that the cross of Christ “is the event in which God makes known his holiness and his love simultaneously, in one event, in an absolute manner. ... The cross is the only place where the loving, forgiving, merciful God is revealed in such a way that we perceive that his holiness and his love are equally infinite.”³

NECESSARY TO SAVE

There is one other way in which the cross is necessary. The cross is essential for our salvation. Anyone who wants to go to heaven must first go to the cross. Eternal life is God's

3. Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (1927; reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), pp. 450, 470.

free gift for anyone who believes that Jesus died for his or her sins on the cross.

To begin with, this means believing that the crucifixion really happened. The historical records show that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by Roman soldiers on a hill just outside Jerusalem in A.D. 30. Believing in Jesus' death on the cross means believing that if you had been there that day, you could have touched His cross and received a splinter in your finger—that's how real it was. The Christ on the cross was a living, bleeding, dying person. To become a believer is to accept that Jesus Christ lived a real life and died a real death.

But believing Jesus died on the cross also means something more. It means believing that He did what He did for your salvation. It means acknowledging that you, personally, are a sinner. It means confessing that you need Jesus Christ to save you from the wrath and curse of God. It means believing that Jesus died on that splintery old cross for your own personal sins. To become a believer is to accept that Jesus Christ is not merely a legend; He lived a real life and died a real death.

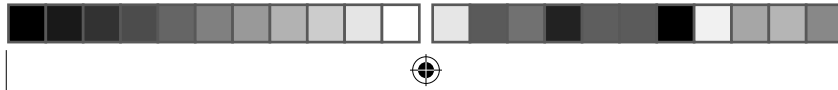
Understanding that Jesus died, or even that He died for sinners, is only part of the faith

that God requires. For example, one woman decided to become a member of the church she was attending. So she went to be interviewed by the church elders. They asked her what she thought it meant to be a Christian. Among other things, she explained how Jesus died on the cross to pay for sin.

The woman's theology was sound, but the elders still felt a little uneasy about the woman's testimony. They were not sure she was a genuine Christian. This was because she spoke in a casual way, as if the cross had little relevance to her own life. There are plenty of people like her in the church. They consider themselves Christians, but they have not made a personal life-and-death commitment to Jesus Christ.

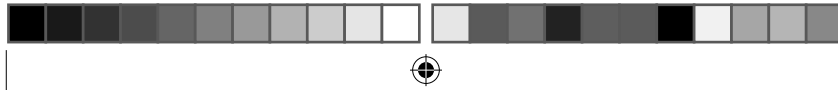
So the elders asked her a follow-up question: "Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross, not just for the sins of others, but for your sins?" There was a long pause, and finally the woman said, "I've never thought about it that way before."

The elders explained to her that she needed to confess that she herself was one of the sinners for whom Christ died. That night she believed that Jesus died on the cross for her sins and received Him as her personal Savior.



This woman came to understand what everyone must understand to be saved: the necessity of the cross. The cross is necessary, not just in a general way as part of God's eternal plan, but necessary for your very own salvation from sin and death.





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