

ABC's 20/20 once had a segment on baby chicks that were packaged and marketed. These tiny chicks traveled on conveyer belts past workers who selected them to fit into a box to be shipped out and sold. The chicks were chosen by sex, size and general appearance. But some were not chosen. The cameras followed these baby chicks as they slipped by the workers and fell off the end of the conveyer belt...to die.

Isn't that like our world? If you don't fit into the "box," you're rejected and left to die. The Cross of Jesus Christ declares that this isn't the way that God deals with us. God doesn't choose us because we fit into His box. He chooses us because He loves us and it's a completely undeserved love.

That's why the Cross means everything to us! It's what the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:14 (p. 826). "*May I never boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" **To the Church of Jesus Christ, the Cross is everything.** As we prepare for Communion, we want to take a few minutes and work through why it is that for 2000 years Christians have so cherished the Cross of Jesus Christ. **Let me suggest Four Reasons.**

1. We treasure the Cross because we know that on it our substitution took place. Jesus Christ was our substitute. He died in our place. We know that on that Cross, Christ took the punishment you and I deserved. The Bible gives us a great example to help us see this truth in the unexpected pardon of a convicted criminal named Barabbas.

In an attempt to appease the Jews when they demanded Jesus' death, Pilate, offered to release one prisoner: Jesus or Barabbas...a convicted felon. The mob cried out for Barabbas and Jesus went to the cross.

Can you imagine how Barabbas felt that first Good Friday? As he rubbed his wrists, chafed from being in shackles and looked up at the center cross standing atop Golgotha. He knew that Jesus was dying on that cross in his place...that our Lord was receiving the sentence he deserved.

We know exactly how Barabbas felt because Jesus did the same thing for us. He died in our place. He paid for our sin. He took our judgment on Himself. He was our substitute. This is one reason that a blood soaked piece of wood is so precious to us. Before Christ died in our place you, we were hopeless. Because of our sin we were separated from a holy God.

The Bible teaches that we were at enmity with God. R. C. Sproul (**picture**) writes, "*The natural enemy of the sinner is One Who is holy, and not only holy but powerful, and not only powerful but just, and not only just but omniscient, not only omniscient but immutably so.*" God is all these things and more, so we had a major problem.

Because of our sin we faced separation from God and eternal death, but God had a plan. Jesus would come and take our punishment upon Himself. He'd take our separation from God and our death on Himself. "[God] made Him Who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Galatians 3:13, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us.*" These verses underscore the amazing truth that on the Cross Jesus paid the price for our defiance of God's law. He's our substitute.

The night before the D-Day invasion General Dwight D. Eisenhower (**picture**) spent the night with the men of the 101st Airborne Division. As the men prepared their planes and checked their equipment, Ike went from soldier to soldier offering words of encouragement. Many of the men were young enough to be Ike's own sons and he treated them as if they were. One correspondent wrote that as Eisenhower watched the C-47s take off and disappear into the darkness on their way to their destination behind enemy lines, his hands were sunk deeply into his pockets, his eyes full of tears. Then, when the last plane was no longer visible, Eisenhower went to his quarters and sat at his desk. He took a pen and paper and wrote a message, one that'd be delivered to the White House in the event of a defeat on the beaches of Normandy. The note was as brief as it was courageous. He wrote, "*Our landings have failed. The troops, the Air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches itself to the attempt, it was mine and mine alone.*"

With this action Eisenhower took responsibility for the actions of those soldiers who were far below him in rank. He modeled a quality seldom seen in a blame-game world. Most of us are willing to take credit for the good we do. Some are willing to take the rap for the bad they do. Very few will assume the responsibilities for the mistakes of others. Fewer still will shoulder the blame for mistakes that have not even been committed yet. But that's what Eisenhower did.

In a magnitude that is infinitely greater, this is what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Long before time began, He loved us and every human being that would ever be born to the extent that He was willing to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself. Jesus' death on the Cross was a substitution because He died in our place.

2. We treasure the Cross because we know that it has provided us with emancipation from the power of sin.

Sin has the power to kill us. Romans 6:23 says, *"The wages of sin-the consequence of sin-is death."* Since we all sin, we all die. *"The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die."* When I conduct a funeral, the undertaker will give me a copy of the obituary. That sheet lists basic facts about the person who died. It tells if they were married, how many children and grandchildren. It records the place and time of the funeral and burial. It includes their birth date and death date. One day an undertaker will hand a sheet with your death date on it to a minister. It's not a pleasant thing to contemplate. Death is something we all dread and do all we can to avoid it.

Our culture spends billions in vain attempts to extend life. We're enslaved by a fear of death. Christians know that God's Word teaches a wonderful truth. On the Cross Jesus died so that we can live. It teaches that because of Jesus' death on the Cross and His resurrection, we don't need to fear death.

God's Word proclaims this wonderful, emancipating truth that whoever puts his/her faith in Christ, *"will not perish but have everlasting life"* (Jn 3:16). 1 Corinthians 15:21, 55, *"For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a Man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive...Death where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Thanks be to God Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!."* The Cross has forever freed us from the fear of death. From the perspective the Cross gives us, death is only gain.

When Bishop Warren Chandler (**picture**), after whom the school of theology at Emory University was named, was dying. As he lay on his death bed, a friend asked him if he was afraid. "Please tell me, frankly, do you fear crossing over the river of death?" "Why," replied Chandler, "I belong to a Father who owns the land on both sides of the river."

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. It's the great hope of our salvation. God cares if you're immobilized by some fear in your life. He cares because that fear intrudes upon His destiny for you. It's His perfect love that casts out fear at the foot of the Cross. Let Him cast out your fear. Then lean back into the arms of an ever loving God.

When F. B. Meyer (**picture**), the great English preacher, knew that he would shortly die, he wrote a friend, *"I have just heard, to my great surprise, that I have but a few days to live. It may be that before this reaches you, I shall have entered the palace. Don't trouble to write. We shall meet in the morning."* The cross frees us from the fear of death.

The cross frees us from the fear of life. Before Jesus died on the cross, man was enslaved to sin, a terrible way to live. Before salvation, we were powerless when it came to withstanding the temptations that come with living in a fallen world. The Cross changed all that. *"For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin because anyone who has died had been freed from sin. Sin is no longer your master, for you are no longer subject to the law, which enslaves you to sin. Instead, you are free by God's grace"* (Rom. 6:6-7, 14).

Because of the Cross we have access to God's power, the power that enables us to say "no" to sin. Through His death Jesus freed us from sin's tyranny, making it possible for us to pursue holiness. We can now be all that God intends us to be, experiencing *"life in all its fullness"* (Jn 10:10).

Chuck Swindoll (**picture**) puts it this way, *"Each moment of every day we choose whom we wish to follow. If it's the Savior, the benefits are many. If it is sin, the consequences are destructive and miserable. Before Christ, we had no choice. Sin was our one and only route. All of life was marked by unrighteousness. But once we came to the Cross and gave the Lord Jesus the right to rule our lives, we were granted a choice we never had before. Grace freed us from the requirement to serve sin, allowing us the opportunity to follow Christ's directives voluntarily."*

During his brutal dictatorship Stalin (**picture**) ordered a purge of all Bibles and believers in Russia. In one Russian city, Stavropol, this order was carried out completely. Thousands of Bibles were taken and believers were sent to the gulags, where many died for being enemies of the state.

But in 1994 a team of missionaries was sent to Stavropol. They didn't know about the history of the city. When the team had difficulty getting Bibles shipped from Moscow, someone mentioned that they knew of a warehouse where Bibles had been stored since Stalin's time. The team prayed together and one member had the courage to go to the warehouse and ask the officials if the Bibles could be removed and distributed to the people in Stavropol. The answer was "yes."

The next day the missionaries returned with a truck and several Russians to help load the Bibles. One was a young man – a skeptical, hostile, agnostic university student who came only for the day's wages. As they loaded the Bibles, someone noticed that the student had disappeared.

Finally, they found him in a corner of the warehouse weeping. He'd slipped away, hoping to quietly take a Bible for himself. What he found pierced him deeply. The inside page of the Bible he'd picked up had the handwritten signature of his own grandmother. It was her Bible. Out of the thousands of Bibles in that warehouse, he stole the one that belonged to his grandmother- a woman horribly persecuted for her faith. That young man was a prisoner and didn't even know it. He was a prisoner to sin.

When someone comes to Christ, they discover though that through the Cross God gives us the power to be free from sin's slavery. Thanks to Calvary when we're tempted to sin we can, *"approach the throne of grace with confidence, and receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"* (Heb. 4:16) For this reason we cling to that bloody piece of wood as someone clings to a life preserver after falling overboard!

3. We treasure the Cross because we know that it is the clearest revelation of God's great love for us all. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* Have you ever wondered if those words are really true? If you've ever questioned whether or not God really loved humanity that much, look to the Cross. The Cross leaves no room for doubt. It's the tangible evidence of this. It doesn't say why God loves us, but it does answer "How much?" Let me share the Contemporary English Version rendering of Romans 5:8. *"God showed how much He loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful."*

Max Lucado (**picture**) writes, *"When asked to describe the width of His love, Jesus stretched one hand to the right and the other to the left and had them nailed in that position, so you would know He died loving you."*

Not only does the cross provide undeniable proof of God's great love, it shows us how long He has loved us. Jesus' death on Golgotha was part of God's plan from the beginning. all along. In his Pentecost sermon Peter included this fact: *"Jesus was given to you and you put Him to death by nailing Him to a cross. But this was God's plan which He had made long ago; He knew this would happen."*

Let me quote Max Lucado (**slide**) again, *"The journey to Jerusalem didn't begin in Jericho. It didn't begin in Galilee. It didn't begin in Nazareth. It didn't even begin in Bethlehem. The journey to the cross began long before. As the echo of the crunching of the fruit was still sounding in the Garden of Eden, Jesus was leaving for Calvary."*

Jesus' death on the Cross had been prophesied for hundreds of years. Later in his sermon Peter said, *"But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled"* (Acts 3:18).

Search the Old Testament and you'll find that there are numerous prophecies and inescapable references to the death of the Savior. Some date back nine centuries before the birth of Christ to a time in which crucifixion was not even known. Yet, they describe the death Jesus was to die in stark detail. In Psalm 22 David gives us this description of the Savior's death: *"For dogs have surrounded Me; a band of evildoers has encompassed Me; They pierced My hands and My feet. I can count all My bones. They look, they stare at Me; They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots"* (vss. 16-18).

The Cross demonstrates that God has loved each of us before the dawn of time. That Cross helps us understand what Jeremiah 31:3 means when it says that God has *"loved us with an everlasting love!"* We cherish the Cross because we know that Jesus died there as our substitute and because through the cross Jesus freed us from the power of sin, and because it is the clearest revelation of God's love. Finally...

4. We treasure the Cross because we see it as God's invitation to all to enter into a relationship with Him. Through the Cross God says to everyone, "Turn from your sin and return to Me. I want to walk with you through life, just as I walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. I want to guide you when you face tough decisions. I want to bear your burdens and share your joys. I want you to know Me. I want things to be as they were before sin came into the world."

This is what God said through the prophet Isaiah, *"Come let us reason together...though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow. Though they be read like crimson, they shall be as wool"* (Is. 1:18).

Jesus spoke of the Cross as God's invitation when He said, *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. When I am lifted up from the earth, [When I am lifted onto the Cross] I will draw all men to Myself. [In so doing I will invite all men into relationship with God]"* (John 3:14-15, 12:32).

Conclusion: The story is told of an old Spartan who tried in vain to make a corpse stand upright, but after failing time and again, he declared, "It wants something within." How true for all of us. That's what we all want — we want something within. We want a power that can break the chains of sin. We want a power that can enable us to stand upright, to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. Where can we find such a power within? Only in the Cross of Jesus Christ.

And where were you? That's the question Britain's Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill (**Pictures**) asked, *"And where were you?"*

In those early days of World War II Churchill called Britain's coal miners together. Britain was facing a great crisis. The coal miners weren't getting out enough coal to fuel the factories that produced the planes, ships, etc., that the country so desperately needed to fight the Nazis.

When Churchill stood up, he said, "I want to give it to you straight—nothing less! Two hundred guns, no more! Twenty tanks, that's all! I heard he (Hitler) was coming with a million men, and I said to myself, 'The British Navy will put five hundred thousand of them to the bottom of the channel but what will we do with half a million of them ashore?'"

And then for the next hour and forty minutes, Winston Churchill outlined the desperate situation confronting Britain. As he concluded his speech, in that soul stirring Churchill style, he said, "When at last it is all over, we'll parade these streets again and as you go by people will call out, 'And where were you?' Someone will answer, 'I marched with the Eighth Army,' and someone else will say, 'I was in the skies over Britain.' Another will reply, 'I was in the Merchant Marines pushing the ships through the sea up to the Archangel.' Then I shall be standing there and I will call out, 'Where were you?' I will hear you answer, 'We were down in the black pits right up against the face of the coal.'"

Then, thousands of coal miners arose and with tears streaming down their faces, cheering the Prime Minister. And the coal came pouring out of those mines to fire the factory furnaces producing ships and planes and tanks! They had caught a fresh vision of the importance of their work.

"And where were you?" Jesus commanded us before He ascended back to Heaven, *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Missionaries around the globe are sharing what we're sharing. Countless pastors fill pulpits preaching this message. Everyday people, working as roofers or plumbers or mechanics or office workers or business owners or teachers or stay at home Moms share the gospel in their world.

When the Lord Jesus asks at the end of the age, *"And where were you?"* May each of us be able to answer, "Lord, I was faithfully sharing the gospel in the mission field where you placed me in!"

The Cross is our message! Our world is hopeless and going to Hell without it! *And where were you?* **The Cross: To the Church it's everything.**