

The Paradox of the Cross

Intro: The cross is the centerpiece of faith; yet it is simultaneously one of the most attractive and offensive events in all of human history. Not surprisingly Paul said that the Greek considered the preaching of the cross “foolishness” and the Jews “offensive.” Yet to the believer it is wondrous. And the more we reflect upon it, the more we see the paradoxes of the cross, the more we understand why people feel so differently about it. Consider some of those paradoxes with me.

The cross was the darkest moment in the history of the world, yet it is the most illuminating event in human history.

What could symbolize the darkness of the day of Jesus’ crucifixion more than that the whole land of Israel was overshadowed with darkness.

“And it was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, the sun being obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two.” (Luke 23:44–45)

Nature itself symbolized what was occurring in the spiritual realm.

Jesus had spoken about it:

“While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours.”” (Luke 22:53)

Yet arising out the darkness was a message that has brought the greatest light to the world.

Those who have heard the message of the gospel and believed have been truly enlightened. The early church referred to their converts as those “enlightened” (Heb. 6:4; 10:32),

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:3–4)

The darkest moment...the greatest light.

The cross was the greatest manifestation of human hatred; but it became the means by which humans are empowered to show their greatest love.

It is impossible to read the account of the cross without sensing the deep hatred that Jesus’ enemies had for him. We see it in their mockery and ridicule.

“And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him, and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. “HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET HIM DELIVER Him now, IF HE TAKES PLEASURE IN HIM; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”” (Matthew 27:39–43)

The psalmist described the utter disdain that Jesus' enemies felt for him in Psalm 22.

"But I am a worm, and not a man, A reproach of men, and despised by the people." (Psalm 22:6)

And yet because of the cross human beings have found their greatest motivation to live in love toward God and their fellowman.

"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (1 John 4:10–11)

"THEREFORE be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." (Ephesians 5:1–2)

The greatest human hatred...the greatest human love.

The cross was the greatest condemnation of sin ever displayed, yet it was the only way to remove sin's condemnation.

Who can understand the meaning of the cross without seeing how truly horrible sin is?! Why would such a great sacrifice as this be necessary? Is it not because of how great sin is? Is it not because of the greatness of its offense to the holiness of God?

"For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh," (Romans 8:3)

But as a result of the cross, sin's condemnation is removed. It is in this same text that Paul shows the cross to be the only hope to remove sin's condemnation.

"THERE is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." (Romans 8:1–2)

Sin condemned...the condemnation of sin removed.

The cross was the greatest display of God's hatred for sin, yet the greatest display of God's love for sinners.

Enlarging upon our previous point we can see how that the cross not only makes known God's hatred for sin, but also becomes the greatest display of His love for sinners.

"For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." (Romans 5:7–9)

Hatred for sin...love for sinners.

The cross was the greatest exhibition of divine justice, yet the most wonderful display of divine mercy.

The cross is inexplicable without reference to the holiness and justice of God. God's justice demanded the punishment of sin. It would have been unjust for God to not visit the threatened judgments of sin upon the sinner.

That is why Paul wrote as he did in Romans these words:

This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:25–26)

And while the cross is the greatest exhibition of divine justice, it is at the same time the most wonderful display of divine mercy.

In it God offers his mercy to sinners by forgiving their wrongs and by not placing upon them the punishment due for their transgressions.

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;” (Romans 3:23–25)

Divine justice...divine mercy.

The cross was the greatest victory Satan ever accomplished, yet it brought about Satan's most stunning defeat and God's greatest victory.

The irony and paradox of the cross is that it is itself the ultimate manifestation of humiliation and defeat. And it is not hard to imagine the celebration in the wicked spirit world at the apparent success they felt they had achieved by ending Jesus' life. Jesus could foresee Satan's intentions:

“I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me;” (John 14:30)

Jesus knew that though Satan intended to use death to defeat him, He would use it to seal Satan's ultimate doom.

“Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out.” (John 12:31)

And so he was! Paul describes God's ultimate victory over the wicked spirit world through the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

“When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.” (Colossians 2:15)

The greatest defeat...the greatest victory.

The cross was the result of the greatest enmity; but it became the means of the greatest reconciliation.

Every day we are confronted with a divided world. The power brokers thrive by dividing and conquering the divided. But there is no division or enmity greater than that which separates man from God and man from man because of sin. We can see it in human relations in Ephesians 2:

“Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time

separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:11–12)

Yet through the cross God brought about the greatest reconciliation.

“For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.” (Ephesians 2:14–16)

“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—” (Colossians 1:21–22)

The greatest enmity...the greatest reconciliation.

The cross was the means of the most torturous death; but it became the way to the most blessed life.

Though we’ve never seen a crucifixion we all know from reading and association with other events how incredibly torturous it was. It was designed to inflict the greatest possible pain upon its victim culminating in a prolonged death.

“And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.” (Acts 2:24)

Numerous NT verses remind us of the suffering of the cross.

“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,” (1 Peter 2:21)

Yet out of His suffering comes the most blessed life.

“The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

“who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,” (2 Timothy 1:9–10)

Tortuous death...blessed life.

The cross was the saddest spectacle humans ever beheld, yet it produces the greatest joy humans can ever achieve.

Even now when our minds go back to the cross we cannot help but be saddened by the cruel suffering that Jesus endured for our sakes; yet even so it produces the greatest joy in the human heart.

“In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus

Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:6–9)
Saddest spectacle...greatest joy!

Conclusion: And so throughout this lesson you have heard me place in juxtaposition things that take us in opposite directions—darkness & light; hatred and love, condemnation and no condemnation, enmity & reconciliation; death and life, sadness and joy. That is the paradox of the cross!

When all is considered we could simply say, “The cross was the most tragic event in history yet the most wonderful thing that has ever happened in the world!”

Each of us is confronted by the cross. What will we do with it? Will we be offended by it? Will we consider it foolishness? Will we understand its message and in faith obey the gospel?