

The Cross

Asking The
Right Questions

John Everett

Introduction

Although not the earliest symbol used by the followers of Jesus Christ to represent their faith (that was a simplified drawing of a fish), the cross is now most commonly used for that purpose. What it stands for is that the crucifixion of Our Lord is seen as the central event of all time. It is the symbol of the salvation won for us by His death. Yet at the time it seemed as a total defeat. Not one of His immediate followers could understand it as a victory at the time it happened: they were hiding in locked rooms, fearing their own arrest too. So how did it achieve what His followers came to believe it achieved? This and many other questions need to be thought through carefully. We even need to be sure we are asking the right questions about the event that the cross focuses on. This exploration will not be academic: it will be, like my other books, a very personal approach. I have read several books whose purpose is to address the question "Why the cross?". The history of the answers to this question has been fully documented, noting how as time moves on there have been different answers, from the earliest post-biblical writings, through later Roman times, through the middle ages, till more modern times too. I will not attempt to recapitulate these. Rather I will focus solely on Scripture, and try to tease out the right questions to be asked, and even explore some of the possible answers.

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July 2019

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ISBN - 13: 9781082536489

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Preface

It is with considerable trepidation that I put finger to keyboard to write under the title 'The Cross'. As C. S. Lewis has pointed out in his *Mere Christianity*, it is far more important simply to believe in the doctrine associated with 'the cross', namely that we are saved through the death of Jesus there, than that we understand perfectly how this works. Our trust in Jesus as our Saviour is a personal relationship, not an intellectual one. In this life 'we know in part', as Paul reminds us. This book is no more than a personal meditation on this central part of what it means to be a Christian. It will surely be full of errors and omissions. But it may stimulate further meditation, which may lead to much greater understanding and therefore deeper love of Our Lord.

The format will be that each chapter will pose a question. I believe all the questions are important. I will, with obvious presumption, suggest answers to these questions. Weigh these carefully. Test them against Scripture. Feel free to disagree.

I pray that I have identified at least some of the right questions, and that my proposed answers are at least helpful, and maybe will lead to even clearer thinking.

What actually happened?

The Romans used a variety of methods when carrying out capital punishment. The kindest was decapitation with a sword. They could push you off a cliff to fall to your death. They could imprison you in a cave to die of starvation. But for slaves and captured rebels they chose to crucify you, intending the most humiliating and painful death they could contrive. When the rebellion of Spartacus was defeated, there were literally thousands crucified along the Appian Way south of Rome. The process would always begin with a scourging. We know that Pilate ordered Jesus to be scourged. A Roman scourge was a whip with several thongs attached to a wooden handle. Each thong had several objects knotted in, to ensure that the back of the victim was torn to shreds: small animal vertebrae with sharp edges or pieces of lead would be typical. If carried on sufficiently long, such a scourging could be fatal. The intention was to make the victim almost insensate through shock. The victim would often be forced to carry the cross beam to the place of execution, always a very public place. Then the victim would be stripped naked and have his wrists nailed outstretched to the cross piece, and his ankles nailed to the upright. The cause of death would eventually be asphyxia, with the victim too weak in this position to fill his lungs any more. To hasten this a victim's legs might be broken, so that he could no longer support his weight by them, rendering inhaling effectively impossible. The suffering of the scourging would also cause the lungs to fill with liquid, pneumonia caused by a shock reaction from

the pain, adding to the process of asphyxia. All this had happened to Our Lord: Pilate ordered him to be scourged (John 19:1), and when the Jews asked that the bodies should not be left on the cross during the Sabbath, we read:

Therefore the Jews, because it was the Preparation Day, so that the bodies wouldn't remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a special one), asked of Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. Therefore the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who was crucified with him; but when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was already dead, they didn't break his legs. However one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. [John 19:31-34]

We are told a little more by Luke about the two criminals crucified alongside Jesus:

There were also others, two criminals, led with him to be put to death. When they came to the place that is called "The Skull", they crucified him there with the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Dividing his garments amongst them, they cast lots. The people stood watching. The rulers with them also scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others. Let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming to him and offering him vinegar, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" An inscription was also written over him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." One of

the criminals who was hanged insulted him, saying, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Don't you even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." He said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." [Luke 23:32-43]

Luke also describes Jesus' final moment as 'breathed his last' (23:46), drawing attention to the fact that it was death by asphyxia when someone was crucified.

When all these details have been noted it is clear what a horrific death Jesus has suffered. This leads us to our next question.

Did Jesus know what would happen to him?

Certainly Jesus would know what a crucifixion involved. His country had been occupied by the Romans from before He was born. Crucifixions were always intended to be a public display, and there had been minor rebellions in Galilee, where He grew up, and He would have seen the outcomes as these were defeated.

But did He know that this would happen to him? If we look at the gospel narratives we get our answer. In Mark's gospel we read that after Jesus had been declared by Peter at Caesarea Philippi to be the Messiah, 'He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.' (8:32)

A little later we have this more detailed reference:

They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus was going in front of them, and they were amazed; and those who followed were afraid. He again took the twelve, and began to tell them the things that were going to happen to him. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death, and will deliver him to the Gentiles. They will mock him, spit on him, scourge him, and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came near to him, saying, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we will ask." He said to

them, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Grant to us that we may sit, one at your right hand, and one at your left hand, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and to be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?" They said to him, "We are able." Jesus said to them, "You shall indeed drink the cup that I drink, and you shall be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with; but to sit at my right hand and at my left hand is not mine to give, but for whom it has been prepared." When the ten heard it, they began to be indignant towards James and John. Jesus summoned them, and said to them, "You know that they who are recognised as rulers over the nations lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so amongst you, but whoever wants to become great amongst you shall be your servant. Whoever of you wants to become first amongst you, shall be bondservant of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." [Mark 10:32-45]

Jesus links his death with being a 'servant', and talks about it as being a 'ransom'. These are themes we will need to explore soon.

According to Matthew, in the last week Jesus was aware of the precise day this would happen:

When Jesus had finished all these words, he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." [Matt. 26:1-2]

On the night that He was arrested, He toiled in mental anguish about what lay ahead:

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and severely troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me." He went forward a little, fell on his face, and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me; nevertheless, not what I desire, but what you desire." He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What, couldn't you watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray, that you don't enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, a second time he went away and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cup can't pass away from me unless I drink it, your desire be done." He came again and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. He left them again, went away, and prayed a third time, saying the same words. Then he came to his disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let's be going. Behold, he who betrays me is at hand." [Matt 26:36-46]

Jesus had even known which of the twelve would betray him. This is what we read during the last meal Jesus had with his followers, just before He was arrested:

When Jesus had said this, he was troubled in spirit,

and testified, "Most certainly I tell you that one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was at the table, leaning against Jesus' breast. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks." He, leaning back, as he was, on Jesus' breast, asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus therefore answered, "It is he to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After the piece of bread, then Satan entered into him. Then Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." Now nobody at the table knew why he said this to him. For some thought, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus said to him, "Buy what things we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. Therefore having received that morsel, he went out immediately. It was night. [John 13:21-28]

Jesus had even told Judas to get on with it quickly.

All this leaves us in no doubt but that Jesus knew precisely what was going to happen to him.

How did Jesus know what would happen to him?

To enquire into the inner workings of the mind of Our Lord is a perilous and presumptive thing to do, of course. I fully recognise this. He was born truly human. Watching my own children, and now grandchildren, grow up gives one an insight into the way humans develop self-awareness. So it is possible to ask certain questions: for instance, how old was the young Jesus when His mother first helped Him to understand the nature of His conception? For we know that by the age of twelve He could refer to the Almighty as His Father.

When he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast, and when they had fulfilled the days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. Joseph and his mother didn't know it, but supposing him to be in the company, they went a day's journey, and they looked for him amongst their relatives and acquaintances. When they didn't find him, they returned to Jerusalem, looking for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the middle of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking them questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When they saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I were anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" They didn't understand the saying which he spoke to them. And

he went down with them, and came to Nazareth. He was subject to them, and his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men. [Luke 2:42-52]

We also cannot help but notice how He was listening to the temple teachers and asking them questions. We can assume that Jesus had a typical education for a Jewish boy at the local synagogue school. He would learn to read and write, and He would study the Jewish scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament. He would learn all the stories behind the regular flow of ritual celebrations, especially the meaning of the Passover. We know for sure that He was familiar with the prophets, for He quoted Isaiah at the very beginning of His public ministry, saying that this particular prophecy referred to Him.

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and news about him spread through all the surrounding area. He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He entered, as was his custom, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began to tell

them, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." [Luke 4:15-20]

The passage from Isaiah that He read was from chapter 61, the first two verses. It is only right to presume that Jesus was familiar with the whole book. We have already noted that Jesus said to His ambitious followers that He had not come to be served, but to be a servant (Mark 10:45). The idea of a servant fulfilling God's work comes very clearly in an earlier passage from Isaiah:

*Who has believed our message?
To whom has the LORD's arm been revealed?
For he grew up before him as a tender plant,
and as a root out of dry ground.
He has no good looks or majesty.
When we see him, there is no beauty that we should
desire him.
He was despised
and rejected by men,
a man of suffering
and acquainted with disease.
He was despised as one from whom men hide their
face;
and we didn't respect him.
Surely he has borne our sickness
and carried our suffering;
yet we considered him plagued,
struck by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions.
He was crushed for our iniquities.
The punishment that brought our peace was on him;
and by his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray.
Everyone has turned to his own way;*

*and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed,
yet when he was afflicted he didn't open his mouth.
As a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and as a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he didn't open his mouth.
He was taken away by oppression and judgement.
As for his generation,
who considered that he was cut off out of the land of
the living
and stricken for the disobedience of my people?
They made his grave with the wicked,
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him.
He has caused him to suffer.
When you make his soul an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring.
He will prolong his days
and the LORD's pleasure will prosper in his hand.
After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light and be satisfied.
My righteous servant will justify many by the
knowledge of himself;
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion with the great.
He will divide the plunder with the strong;
because he poured out his soul to death
and was counted with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sins of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

[Isaiah 53:1-12]

This prophecy about what would happen to the

Lord's righteous servant must have played very deeply into the mind of Jesus. There are phrases pointing to the manner of His death (despised, rejected, pierced, punishment, wounds) and also to what would be achieved by this:

*But he was pierced for our transgressions.
He was crushed for our iniquities.
The punishment that brought our peace was on him;
and by his wounds we are healed.*

When you make his soul an offering for sin,

*My righteous servant will justify many by the
knowledge of himself; and he will bear their
iniquities.*

he bore the sins of many.

All of these give meaning to the death suffered by the 'righteous servant', and we need to explore these meanings as we try to understand the basic question in this book: 'why the cross?'.

There are other passages in the Old Testament that Jesus would have taken to heart, and we will think about them in due course. But in this passage from Isaiah I would suggest we have the heart of the matter that was posted as the title of this chapter.

Why was Jesus crucified? (1)

The word 'why' has two meanings: 'because of what' and 'for what purpose'. If I ask you the question 'why are you doing that?' I may want to know what caused you to do that, what was the reason for your action, or I may be asking what you were hoping to achieve by doing that. Or possibly both of these, of course. There will need to be chapters here where both meanings of 'why' are being addressed, so the question will be posed more than once. Hence the need for an appended number.

In this chapter we are are looking at the first meaning, the 'because of what' meaning.

Put simply Jesus was crucified because the religious and political leaders saw Him as dangerous.

When we read the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) we find that as soon as Jesus began His public ministry there were both positive and negative reactions. People flocked to hear Him and received His healing and deliverance. But there were those who were deeply offended. This is how Luke describes what happened after He had spoken in the synagogue of His home town claiming that the prophecy of Isaiah applied to Him. (We have already cited this passage).

All testified about him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth, and they said, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will tell me this parable, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done at Capernaum, do also here in your

hometown.” He said, “Most certainly I tell you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But truly I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land. Elijah was sent to none of them, except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed, except Naaman, the Syrian.” They were all filled with wrath in the synagogue, as they heard these things. They rose up, threw him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill that their city was built on, that they might throw him off the cliff. But he, passing through the middle of them, went his way. (Luke 4:22-30)

In the next chapter Luke describes how the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, accused Him of uttering blasphemies and associating with impure people.

On one of those days, he was teaching; and there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every village of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. The power of the Lord was with him to heal them. Behold, men brought a paralysed man on a cot, and they sought to bring him in to lay before Jesus. Not finding a way to bring him in because of the multitude, they went up to the housetop, and let him down through the tiles with his cot into the middle before Jesus. Seeing their faith, he said to him, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” But Jesus,

perceiving their thoughts, answered them, "Why are you reasoning so in your hearts? Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you;' or to say, 'Arise and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"(he said to the paralysed man), "I tell you, arise, take up your cot, and go to your house." Immediately he rose up before them, and took up that which he was laying on, and departed to his house, glorifying God. Amazement took hold on all, and they glorified God. They were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen strange things today." After these things he went out, and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office, and said to him, "Follow me!" He left everything, and rose up and followed him. Levi made a great feast for him in his house. There was a great crowd of tax collectors and others who were reclining with them. Their scribes and the Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:17-32)

Jesus also enraged these leaders who held that the meticulous keeping of the Law of Moses was vital by treating the Sabbath regulations in a different way.

Now on the second Sabbath after the first, he was going through the grain fields. His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why do you do that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?" Jesus, answering them, said, "Haven't you read what David did when he was

hungry, he, and those who were with him; how he entered into God's house, and took and ate the show bread, and gave also to those who were with him, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests alone?" He said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." It also happened on another Sabbath that he entered into the synagogue and taught. There was a man there, and his right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against him. But he knew their thoughts; and he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Rise up, and stand in the middle." He arose and stood. Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you something: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm? To save a life, or to kill?" He looked around at them all, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did, and his hand was restored as sound as the other. But they were filled with rage, and talked with one another about what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:1-11)

When Mark records this incident, the reaction of the Pharisees is even more explicit:

The Pharisees went out, and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him. (Mark3:6)

This introduces us to the political set up in the Holy Land at this time. The province had been conquered by Pompey, and the Romans ruled it either directly, through a provincial governor in Judea (Pilate at the time of Jesus' ministry), or indirectly through a local ruler, in this case Herod Antipas, who ruled over the northern part, Galilee. We will meet this

Herod later in the trial of Jesus.

There are many more incidents of a similar nature when Jesus offended the religious leaders, but things came to a critical climax in the last week of Jesus' earthly life, when He entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the Week of Unleavened Bread which precedes the Passover festival. At this time Jerusalem was packed with devout Jews from all over the Mediterranean lands.

Jesus was welcomed as though He was the Messiah that all devout Jews were hoping for. It was now that Jesus began to challenge the religious authorities.

They came to Jerusalem, and Jesus entered into the temple, and began to throw out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and overthrew the money changers' tables, and the seats of those who sold the doves. He would not allow anyone to carry a container through the temple. He taught, saying to them, "Isn't it written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations?' But you have made it a den of robbers!" The chief priests and the scribes heard it, and sought how they might destroy him. For they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18)

Mark goes on to record how Jesus was challenged by these leaders: 'By what authority are you doing these things?' They then try to trap Him into an obvious political indiscretion: 'Is it lawful pay taxes to Caesar?' And the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection tried to outdo Him in a theological debate about life after death. All this led up to the

clear decision made by the religious leaders that they had to get rid of this man.

It was now two days before the feast of the Passover and the unleavened bread, and the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might seize him by deception, and kill him. For they said, "Not during the feast, because there might be a riot amongst the people." (Mark 14:1-2)

Their problem was that a public arrest was impossible because of Jesus' popularity with the people who were in Jerusalem for the festival. What Judas offered to do was provide a place where a private arrest might be made that would not be seen by the crowd.

Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went away to the chief priests, that he might deliver him to them. They, when they heard it, were glad, and promised to give him money. He sought how he might conveniently deliver him. (Mark 14:10-11)

In John's gospel we read of the kind of discussion these religious leaders already had had:

The chief priests therefore and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said, "What are we doing? For this man does many signs. If we leave him alone like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is advantageous for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." Now

he didn't say this of himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that he might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day forward they took counsel that they might put him to death.

(John 11:47-53)

This explains the political as well as the religious dimension to the opposition they had. They feared that if Jesus were to advance His claim openly to be the Messiah, the King of the Jews, this would be seen as a rebellion, and that the Romans would retaliate against them. They had a privileged position under the Romans which they did not want to lose.

As we know, the betrayal of Judas was successful; he led the arresting soldiers to where he knew Jesus would be on his return from the house in Jerusalem where they had had their last meal to the house in Bethany where Jesus was staying. Jesus was duly arrested and immediately put on trial.

The details of the trial shows how desperate they were, and how lacking in due process the trial was. Here is the account Matthew gives us.

Those who had taken Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. But Peter followed him from a distance to the court of the high priest, and entered in and sat with the officers, to see the end. Now the chief priests, the elders, and the whole council sought false testimony against Jesus, that

they might put him to death, and they found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.'" The high priest stood up and said to him, "Have you no answer? What is this that these testify against you?" But Jesus stayed silent. The high priest answered him, "I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. Nevertheless, I tell you, after this you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of the sky." Then the high priest tore his clothing, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Behold, now you have heard his blasphemy. What do you think?" They answered, "He is worthy of death!" Then they spat in his face and beat him with their fists, and some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who hit you?" (Matt 26:57-67)

But they had a problem. Under the arrangements whereby the Roman administration allowed them freedom to determine religious leadership they had no power to carry out capital punishment. This could only be authorised by the Roman governor.

Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. They bound him, led him away, and delivered him up to Pontius Pilate, the governor. (Matt 27:1-2)

This is where we get more detail from the gospel of John.

They led Jesus therefore from Caiaphas into the Praetorium. It was early, and they themselves didn't enter into the Praetorium, that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover. Pilate therefore went out to them, and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered him, "If this man weren't an evildoer, we wouldn't have delivered him up to you." Pilate therefore said to them, "Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law." Therefore the Jews said to him, "It is illegal for us to put anyone to death," that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spoke, signifying by what kind of death he should die. Pilate therefore entered again into the Praetorium, called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him, "Do you say this by yourself, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate answered, "I'm not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered you to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not of this world. If my Kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight, that I wouldn't be delivered to the Jews. But now my Kingdom is not from here."

Pilate therefore said to him, "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this reason I have been born, and for this reason I have come into the world, that I should testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" When he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no basis for a charge against him. But you have a custom, that I should release someone to you at the Passover. Therefore, do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?"

Then they all shouted again, saying, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a robber. So Pilate then took Jesus, and flogged him. The soldiers twisted thorns into a crown, and put it on his head, and dressed him in a purple garment. They kept saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and they kept slapping him. Then Pilate went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I bring him out to you, that you may know that I find no basis for a charge against him." Jesus therefore came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple garment. Pilate said to them, "Behold, the man!" When therefore the chief priests and the officers saw him, they shouted, saying, "Crucify! Crucify!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves, and crucify him, for I find no basis for a charge against him." The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." When therefore Pilate heard this saying, he was more afraid. He entered into the Praetorium again, and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Aren't you speaking to me? Don't you know that I have power to release you and have power to crucify you?" Jesus answered, "You would have no power at all against me, unless it were given to you from above. Therefore he who delivered me to you has greater sin." At this, Pilate was seeking to release him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you release this man, you aren't Caesar's friend! Everyone who makes himself a king speaks against Caesar!" When Pilate therefore heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgement seat at a place called "The Pavement", but in Hebrew, "Gabbatha." Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, at about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, "Behold, your

King!” They cried out, “Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” So then he delivered him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led him away. He went out, bearing his cross, to the place called “The Place of a Skull”, which is called in Hebrew, “Golgotha”, where they crucified him, and with him two others, on either side one, and Jesus in the middle. Pilate wrote a title also, and put it on the cross. There was written, “JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Therefore many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. The chief priests of the Jews therefore said to Pilate, “Don’t write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘he said, “I am King of the Jews.””” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.” (John 18:28-19:22)

All this explains why Jesus was crucified. The religious leaders of the Jews wanted rid of Jesus, and the Roman governor was afraid of his political career being jeopardised by a failure to deal adequately with a potential rival to the Roman Emperor. Religion and politics killed Jesus. Human beings, spiteful, weak, and (let us not mince words) sinful, killed Jesus.

When a perfect loving man comes into this sinful world of ours, this is what will happen. We humans will kill him. God sent His Son knowing this would happen. His Son knew this would happen. And He showed his 'greater love has no man than this', by allowing it to happen.

Why was Jesus crucified? (2)

We now turn to looking at the second meaning of the word 'why', the 'what was it hoped to achieve?' meaning. We know that Jesus knew what was going to happen when he finally confronted the religious leaders in the temple. The key point to notice is that Jesus chose to do so at the Passover Festival. It was not, for instance, at the Day of Atonement, or any other festival.

The Passover, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, and a slaughtered lamb too, was the annual commemoration of the escape from slavery in Egypt. The escape from slavery; note that.

Here is what happened:

Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus, saying to him, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain person, and tell him, "The Teacher says, "My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples."'" The disciples did as Jesus commanded them, and they prepared the Passover. . . . As they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it, and broke it. He gave to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, "All of you drink it, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the remission of sins. But I tell you that I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on, until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's Kingdom." (Matt 26:17-19)

This passage is cited without the words Jesus spoke about his betrayal, as we have already seen those in the John passage cited above. We need just one more passage to view, where the words 'do this in memory of me' are included.

He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." Likewise, he took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:19-20)

Jesus said that His blood was going to be poured out for many for the remission of sins. He said that His followers should re-enact the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine as a memorial of His saving death. He said that this sacrifice He was making was the institution of the New Covenant.

Three hugely important ideas, and we must use them to understand the answer to the question posed as the title of this chapter. This is emphasised by Paul when he says, using yeast as a metaphor for wrong-doing:

Purge out the old yeast, that you may be a new lump, even as you are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed in our place. (1 Cor 5:7)

In the same letter Paul explains the purpose of the memorial meal that Christians have:

For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night in

which he was betrayed took bread. When he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "Take, eat. This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way he also took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink, in memory of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-25)

The New Covenant is being established by the events of this Passover, this replacement of a sacrificed lamb by the sacrifice on the cross of Our Lord.

So what do we know about the New Covenant, the new way in which God would relate to His people? This prophecy of Jeremiah is our answer:

"Behold, the days come," says the LORD, "that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which covenant of mine they broke, although I was a husband to them," says the LORD. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the LORD: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and I will write it in their heart. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. They will no longer each teach his neighbour, and every man teach his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD;' for they will all know me, from their least to their greatest," says the LORD: "for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer 31:31-34)

We have here the thought that the covenant being replaced is the one established at the first Passover, when God's people were taken out of the land of Egypt. This was followed by the law giving at Mount Sinai. Now God wants His people to have His law in their inward parts, written in their hearts. The Old Covenant had a whole tribe dedicated as priests, teaching people about God. Now there will be no need for intermediaries between God and His people, since they will all know Him directly. And finally instead of a sacrificial system for dealing with sin, God will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

John the Baptist had recognised the truth of this central concept of the New Covenant. He said this of Jesus:

The next day, he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

The answers given in this chapter are the heart of the matter without doubt, and we can use them as a starting point of understanding. We will not forget these central themes as we explore the further ideas we find in the New Testament writings.

What is forgiveness?

We now have established that the purpose of the death was to secure the forgiveness of sins. This is central to the New Covenant. So we need to focus on what forgiveness means.

Forgiveness is essentially the re-establishment of a relationship broken by some wrong-doing. The effect of the wrong-doing may persist. There are some wrongs that cannot be undone. But if I forgive someone it means that I am not going to let that wrong spoil the relationship between us. We will still be friends.

For forgiveness to happen, of course, it must be wanted. Usually this means it must actually be asked for. But at the very least it must be welcomed.

When Jesus was asked how His followers should pray, He included that we should ask for forgiveness, and added that we should be forgivers too. Since we have received forgiveness we may never withhold it from any who need our forgiveness.

Receiving forgiveness puts both parties 'at one' again with each other, and from this idea comes the word 'atonement'. Another word for the restoration of a relationship is 'reconciliation'. Let us observe how these words are used in the New Testament to explain further the purpose of Jesus' death.

My little children, I write these things to you so that you may not sin. If anyone sins, we have a Counsellor with the Father, Jesus Christ, the

righteous. And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

The initiative was all from God. As Paul puts it:

But God commends his own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:8)

Paul also talks about reconciliation.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we will be saved by his life. (Rom 5:10)

But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:18-19)

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul talks about the division, the animosity, between Jew and Gentile. This hostility has been put away, Paul says, by the death of Christ. It has reconciled the opponents, and brought both sides back to God through Jesus.

For he is our peace, who made both one, and broke down the middle wall of separation, having

abolished in his flesh the hostility, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man of the two, making peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, having killed the hostility through it. (Eph 2:14-16)

Similar thoughts about the work of Jesus on the cross come in his letter to the Colossians:

For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself by him, whether things on the earth or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross. You, being in past times alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil deeds, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and without defect and blameless before him. (Col 1:19-22)

Here is the atonement, the making of peace, the work of reconciling enemies. We were (potentially are) the enemies of God. But God has made peace with us through the death of Christ so that we may become perfectly in the right relationship with God, and all our sins put away to make us without defect and blameless.

When we look at what happened on the cross we are shown how much God loved us. This persuades us how willing He is to forgive us. Aware of the extent of God's love we can respond by desiring to receive this restoration of the loving relationship the Creator has always wanted to have with mankind. This is what the New Covenant offers.

To whom was the ransom paid?

We saw in an earlier chapter that Jesus was very clear about what lay ahead for Him. He would give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). This has led people to ask: to whom was this ransom paid?

There have been two answers put forward to this question: one is that the ransom was paid to Satan, and the other that it was paid to God.

The first answer assumes that Satan, whose name means 'the accuser', demanded that the sins of mankind required punishment, and that this should be death. So in order to save mankind Jesus offered His death as a substitute. Satan should be satisfied with this, as he had achieved the death he sought.

The other idea is that it is God who demands a death.

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

The idea is that God is a righteous God and cannot allow sin to go unpunished. But He is also a loving God and so determines that He, through His Son, will bear the punishment Himself. This explanation of the atonement has been called 'penal substitution'.

There are problems, however, with both these answers. The first one seems to give undue power to the arch-enemy of the Almighty. Is God bound to satisfy every claim of 'the accuser'. We can certainly see the activity of 'the accuser' in the events that led up to the crucifixion: Judas was inspired by Satan

we are told (Luke 22:3; John 13:27). The chief priests and other members of the Sanhedrin were rabid in their accusations, and carried those accusations, now in political terms rather than religious ones, to Pilate, demanding that their shrill accusations be taken proper notice of. So there was plenty of satanic (accusatory) activity. But what picture does this idea give us of God? Could He be forced to respond? What power can compel God to do anything?

The other answer has problems too, in the picture it paints of God. Is God an angry God, so cross with the sinfulness of mankind that He demands that at least someone should be punished? I am seriously unhappy with this picture of a spiteful God. It gives the impression that God can only forgive a sinner if there is not someone punished instead of the sinner.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question when we ask to whom was the ransom paid. This is taking the wrong view of what the word 'ransom' meant in the first century. It actually referred to the process whereby a slave was given freedom (they called it manumission). So by using this word Jesus was saying that His death was to be the means whereby slaves were going to be set free. Free from what? Obviously from the power that sin has over us; free from the power of God's arch-enemy; free to be able to be the people God wants us to be; free to become part of God's kingdom. These are ideas to go into more detail about, again using the scripture passages that expand this concept of being set free.

How does the cross set us free?

When Jesus began His public ministry He announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

Now after John was taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Good News of God's Kingdom, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and God's Kingdom is at hand! Repent, and believe in the Good News." (Mark 1:14-15)

His ministry was focused on establishing God's rule by the defeating of God's enemies. If you read through the early chapters of Mark's Gospel you will see how this worked out. Jesus cast out demons, and healed the sick. He was accused of being in league with Satan to have this power.

The scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul," and, "By the prince of the demons he casts out the demons." He summoned them and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. If Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he can't stand, but has an end. But no one can enter into the house of the strong man to plunder unless he first binds the strong man; then he will plunder his house. (Mark 3:22-27)

Jesus saw His whole purpose of being on earth as the overthrow of the kingdom of God's arch-enemy. In order to understand fully the meaning of the cross we need to focus on the whole sequence of events, from the incarnation, through the ministry of Jesus,

then the cross, and then, most importantly, the resurrection. It may seem taking the cross on its own that Satan had won. But the resurrection reveals the truth: Satan has been defeated.

Jesus speaks of the world as being under the power of Satan, but Jesus has come to overthrow this power.

“Now is the judgement of this world. Now the prince of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” But he said this, signifying by what kind of death he should die. (John 12:31-33)

Jesus referred several times to Satan as 'the prince of this world.' (John 14:30;16:11)

Paul understands that we Christian are in continual conflict with hidden diabolic entities.

For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world's rulers of the darkness of this age, and against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)

Paul says very clearly that Jesus' victory of the powers of evil was through the cross.

You were dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh. He made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, wiping out the handwriting in ordinances which was against us. He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Having

stripped the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.
(Col 2:13-15)

Satan was defeated by the cross, Paul is saying, and that means that we are free from the dominion of sin, and can live sharing in Jesus' victory, being 'made alive together with Him.'

This idea of the victory of God's kingdom was central in the prayer Jesus taught His followers to use: 'Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' God's kingdom is explained: it is when His will is done. We are to be part of the establishment of His will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Let us explore this idea in a new chapter.

What does it mean to be saved?

That we are saved by the cross is central to all we have been viewing so far. It is a gift, received by faith, which we could never earn or deserve, as Paul makes clear:

You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience. We also all once lived amongst them in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus; for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them. (Eph 2:1-10)

This passage talks of where we were: dead, full of sin, under the influence of Satan, here called the prince of the power of the air, full of lust, and deserving God's rejection. I think that is the best way to understand 'wrath'. God cannot have any

fellowship with sin. By His very nature God must reject sin.

Then Paul explains that in spite of this state that we were in, God has made us alive, has raised us up, and has made it possible for us to be the people He wants us to be, to do the things He has destined us to do. The word 'saved' comes twice in this passage and each time Paul says that it is by grace that we have been saved. Grace means something far beyond what we deserve, a gift we could never earn.

We learn from this passage that being saved is far more than simply being 'let off' whatever would have been the right punishment for our sinfulness. Any doctrine of salvation as being simply that seems to me to fail to give the right weight to the positive. It is purely a negative: something has not happened or will not happen. The positive is what will happen: life of a different kind; freedom to be what we otherwise could not be.

In another letter Paul thinks through the question of whether it was right for God to do this. Surely, some might argue, it was not a just act to forgive sinners. God should let them suffer for their misdeeds. Paul is sure that God was acting justly.

But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God sent to be an

atonement sacrifice, through faith in his blood, for a demonstration of his righteousness through the passing over of prior sins, in God's forbearance; to demonstrate his righteousness at this present time; that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:21-26)

This is where the cross makes all the difference. The atoning sacrifice, the blood, is what we now put our faith in. This benefit is applied 'to all and on all those who believe'. It is an undeserved gift. It is received by faith.

How was the cross a victory?

The New Testament is very clear that the cross was a victory, even though it may have looked otherwise. The key to this is that the cross was not the end, but the beginning. We cannot understand the cross except through the fact of the resurrection. Paul makes this very clear.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. . . . If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith also is in vain. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then they also who are fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable. (1 Cor 15:3ff)

Later in the same chapter he makes very clear why the resurrection is vital to God's whole plan.

But now Christ has been raised from the dead. He became the first fruit of those who are asleep. For since death came by man, the resurrection of the dead also came by man. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then those who are Christ's, at his coming. Then the end comes, when he will deliver up the Kingdom to God, even the Father, when he will have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. (1 Cor 15:20-26)

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must become imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable body will have become imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then what is written will happen: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "Death, where is your sting? Hades, where is your victory?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:51-56)

The last enemy, death, has been destroyed. Our physical bodies are not intended to last for ever, for they are perishable. But God's plan is for a massive transformation. Those who trust in Jesus will share in His resurrection in the fulness of time. Their bodies will become like His resurrected body. The natural outcome of physical death has been negated. There is a wonderful future instead. Paul insists that this future is beyond our imagination.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is also a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:42-44)

Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of all this, and it is right to understand this as a perfect victory.

What sort of sacrifice?

The Old Testament book of Leviticus describes the way God wanted His people to live. There are a host of rules about diet, health, sexual relationships, even clothing. The rules about how and where to worship God are very detailed, and involve the shedding of blood in various different types of sacrifice. There was a priestly tribe, and a sacred building, initially portable (and later used as the model for a more permanent building, the temple at Jerusalem).

There is not space here to go into all these details, but we can note that there were several types of sacrifice: there was a thanksgiving sacrifice (first fruits), as alluded to in the passage from Paul we looked at in the previous chapter. There was a sacrifice for any sin that was committed accidentally. There was also an annual sacrifice for the sins of the whole nation, on the Day of Atonement.

We have seen that Jesus chose to align His sacrificial death with the annual commemoration of the means by which the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, the Passover Lamb. We have seen how Paul picks up this idea.

The Letter to the Hebrews takes an additional view. Jesus is not only the victim of the sacrifice, He is the High Priest who offers it. Reading through this letter we see Jesus referred to as the perfect High Priest many times. The following passage makes the best summary of this theme:

Now indeed even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and an earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared. In the first part were the lamp stand, the table, and the show bread; which is called the Holy Place. After the second veil was the tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which was a golden pot holding the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat, of which things we can't speak now in detail. Now these things having been thus prepared, the priests go in continually into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the services, but into the second the high priest alone, once in the year, not without blood, which he offers for himself, and for the errors of the people. The Holy Spirit is indicating this, that the way into the Holy Place wasn't yet revealed while the first tabernacle was still standing. This is a symbol of the present age, where gifts and sacrifices are offered that are incapable, concerning the conscience, of making the worshipper perfect, being only (with meats and drinks and various washings) fleshly ordinances, imposed until a time of reformation. But Christ having come as a high priest of the coming good things, through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, nor yet through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify to the cleanness of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered

himself without defect to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, since a death has occurred for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, that those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where a last will and testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him who made it. For a will is in force where there has been death, for it is never in force while he who made it lives. Therefore even the first covenant has not been dedicated without blood. For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." Moreover he sprinkled the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry in the same way with the blood. According to the law, nearly everything is cleansed with blood, and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission. It was necessary therefore that the copies of the things in the heavens should be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ hasn't entered into holy places made with hands, which are representations of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest enters into the holy place year by year with blood not his own, or else he must have suffered often since the foundation of the world. But now once at the end of the ages, he has been revealed to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Inasmuch as it is appointed

for men to die once, and after this, judgement, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, without sin, to those who are eagerly waiting for him for salvation.
(Hebrews ch. 9)

I have cited the whole chapter here, as there is such a complete exposition of the difference between the Levitical procedures of the first covenant, and the way in which Jesus' death establishes the way God relates to His people, the New Covenant.

Jesus is both High Priest and the sacrificial victim. It is the blood of Jesus that is offered. He has 'put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.' The Old Covenant had provided a copy, a type, a model, to predict the way God would eventually provide the solution to the problem of sin. The model has been replaced with the reality.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a central concept in every description of what Jesus achieved by dying on the cross. We need to be clear what forgiveness is.

Jesus made forgiveness a cornerstone theme of his teaching. We need to pray for forgiveness. We need to forgive others too.

Pray like this: “Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. Let your Kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.” “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt 6:9-15)

Here we see that 'trespasses' and 'debts' are made to be equivalent. When Jesus told parables about forgiveness He used the idea of debts.

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Until seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I don’t tell you until seven times, but, until seventy times seven. Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he had begun to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But because he couldn’t pay, his lord commanded

him to be sold, with his wife, his children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will repay you all!' The lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him and forgave him the debt. "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii, and he grabbed him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you!' He would not, but went and cast him into prison until he should pay back that which was due. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were exceedingly sorry, and came and told their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him in and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?' His lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly Father will also do to you, if you don't each forgive your brother from your hearts for his misdeeds." (Matt 18:21-35)

So one condition for receiving forgiveness is that we forgive others, as often as we possibly can. And there is another condition too: repentance. John the Baptist had preached a message of 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' (Luke 3:3)

Jesus' final instructions were the same:

He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from

the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:46-47)

Repentance means literally 'getting a new mind'. It is clear that forgiveness is a two-sided event. The party injured must offer it, and the one to whom it is offered must want it. Seeking forgiveness means acknowledging that one has done wrong, and that one regrets this wrongdoing. One must turn away from the wrongdoing, admitting that it was wrong. One must get a new mind about it.

The outcome of forgiveness is relational. Before the forgiveness there was estrangement. After the forgiveness there is reconciliation. That is what forgiveness delivers. Reconciliation is a key word in understanding what the cross achieved:

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we will be saved by his life. (Rom 5:10)

But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:18-20)

In a very clear statement Paul emphasises this, speaking of Jesus as follows:

. . . who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the Kingdom of the Son of his love, in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins. . . . For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to himself by him, whether things on the earth or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross. You, being in past times alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil deeds, yet now he has reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and without defect and blameless before him. (Col 1:13-22)

These passages are the cornerstone of what the Good News is. Repentance, forgiveness, no longer enemies, reconciliation, peace. The ultimate outcome is here too: being made holy and without defect and blameless.

Literal or symbolic?

The language we use has inherent problems. As Humpty Dumpty said: 'when I use a word it means exactly what I choose it to mean.' Words change their meanings in time too. A few centuries ago the word 'conversation' meant general behaviour. A few decades ago the word 'gay' was never used in the way it is often used nowadays. We also need to look at some of the key words we have found essential in looking behind everything to do with the death of Jesus on the cross. His death certainly may be called a sacrifice. It may be seen as punishment. It was actually cited by Jesus Himself as a ransom. Jesus was called 'the lamb of God', and in Revelation chapter 7 we read of a great multitude of the saved who 'had washed their clothes and made them white in the blood of the lamb' (v. 14).

Here at least we can be sure that we are in symbolic territory, for if you literally wash clothes in blood they get to be red rather than white.

This is why I said in an early chapter that there may be some wrong questions. If the word 'ransom' is symbolic rather than literal we do not need to ask any literal question ('to whom was it paid?'), but rather simply focus on the outcome: freedom as opposed to slavery. Similarly if we focus on 'penalty' rather than 'punishment' we can better understand how the death of Our Lord was the means by which He bore the penalty (the natural outcome of sin being death) of sin for us.

'The blood of the lamb' is a symbolic idea that sums up the whole concept of sacrifice, and in the context

of the Passover emphasises the escape of an enslaved people.

The key thing, therefore, to focus on is outcome: we are set free, we are forgiven, we are made alive, we are reconciled, we have peace with God, we are at one with God, by what happened on the cross.

And Jesus left us with a clear instruction that involved symbols: these are bread and wine, symbolic of the broken body and the shed blood, by which we receive forgiveness and are made members of the New Covenant. 'Do this in remembrance of me.' In my church we obey this commandment regularly, and in my particular case, every week. I try never to miss this opportunity for the holy symbols to be for me a reminder, a memorial, of the means by which I am saved. Jesus' commandment here shows how central His death on the cross is to the whole business of being a Christian. Without the cross I would have no hope of being able to carry out His other commandment, that we love one another as He has loved us.