

## The Sign of the Cross (The Epic of the Cross Series – Part I)

3/1/2009

1. When you see a cross, what does it mean to you? What goes through your mind?

The answers to this will likely be quite varied. For example, a cross worn as a necklace might well suggest that the wearer is a Christian, while a cross on the side of a building usually signals that this is a Christian church. But what about a cross worn as a large tattoo on a muscular guy who looks like he just came from a gang war? What about a cross on a sticker plastered to a car that looks like it was the loser in a demolition derby? It would appear that the symbol of a cross means different things to different people.

2. Do any of the thoughts or meanings shared above have any connection to the meaning of the cross on the day Jesus underwent crucifixion?

This will depend on what happened as a result of Q1. As Christians we acknowledge that Jesus died to pay for our sins, but most wear the cross more as a testimony to others than as a daily reminder to ourselves of that day 2000 years ago. It is more like a symbol of our membership in a certain group than a prod about our need to take up our own cross and follow in His footsteps.

3. Read Mark 8:27 – 30 and reflect on the first rebuke of Peter by Jesus as discussed by Pastor Steve.

Peter was the first to use the term Messiah, but Jesus knew that Peter didn't understand the ramifications of what he was saying. We see that in the following verses (next question). One gets the feeling that Jesus wants to reveal more of the story before the group has to deal with the fall out of announcing that He is the Messiah whom the Jews have been awaiting for centuries. However, you sense that Jesus wanted them to start thinking about this, sorting out their thoughts about just exactly who this person was that they had been following for the last several years.

4. Continue reading Mark 8:31 - 38. Why is Jesus picking on Peter so much? This incident is also found in Matt. 16:21-23, so it must be significant.

Peter tends to speak first and plug his brain in second. He is not one to carefully consider each word that comes out of his mouth – before it comes out. Jesus has just recognized this willingness of Peter to say what God has given him to say by making him the leader of the new Christian church (Matt. 16:17 – 19; note this is just before Peter is rebuked for trying to argue Jesus out of heading for the cross). However, at this point in time, Peter does not understand the cross. He was looking for a leader who would rally the Jewish people and overthrow the Romans. Jesus knew His mission had a much larger purpose.

5. Pastor Steve described attributes of modern Christians that have parallels to Peter's viewpoint. How would you summarize them?

While we acknowledge the roll of the cross in our forgiveness, whenever we think about or talk about Jesus, we describe this loving person who liked children and healed the sick. We talk about the fact that he was sinless and had good people skills. He was a charismatic speaker and could debate the Pharisees into the ground. The cross is rarely discussed.

6. As described by Pastor Steve, what is the difference between the crucifixion and the cross?

The crucifixion is a specific event that happened two thousand years ago just outside of Jerusalem. The cross is what is happening today, a living reality. It's not a decoration; it is a part of our lives. It is all about us picking up our own cross and following Jesus. (Mark 8:34)

7. How does the cross define our relationship with God?

a. The cross is more than just salvation. Each of us has a personal relationship with God through Jesus. Thus, the cross opens the door to that relationship. By cleansing us of our sins, it makes us acceptable to have a relationship with God.

b. The cross is also the basis for the continuing relationship. As we consider the cross and all it signifies, we know God better, so our relationship develops.

c. It separates out those who believe in the power of the cross from those who don't, so it also begins to generate other relationships that we develop. These relationships help us grow our relationship with God.

d. The blood spilled on the cross has already won the battle of our life, so everything we do after realizing and accepting that is changed. It becomes our point of reference. Our lives are different from that point forward.

8. Mark 8:34 challenges anyone who would follow Jesus to take up his own cross. Reread it and then read 1Peter 4:1-2; 12-16. Does this mean we should go looking for ways in which to suffer – and that we are not good Christians if we are not suffering?

We should not be surprised nor disappointed if we do face ridicule or persecution because we choose to follow Jesus. In fact, Jesus said you should feel yourself blessed that people would take you seriously enough to attack you (Matt. 5:10-11) if you are doing it for God's sake. On the other hand, if we are out seeking suffering just so we can feel like a martyr, we are doing that for ourselves, not for God. Thus, it is the attitude with which we approach situations that is important. We should be trying to do God's will no matter what comes back at us as a result – good or bad.

7. Toward the end of the sermon, Pastor Steve acknowledged that we all look at the cross from different angles based on our own experiences and then summed up three meanings that we can get from the cross. What were they and how does each of them apply to me?

a. **Suffering of God** – Jesus underwent a tremendously painful experience, including the temporary separation from His Father, in order to be the final blood sacrifice needed in payment for the sins of man. He purposefully set his path for Jerusalem knowing full well what was waiting for Him there. It was a selfless thing to do, but it was clearly the will of His Father.

b. **Power of God** – All the powers of the Roman Empire and the Jewish leadership rallied to stop Jesus. The cross (and the sealed tomb) was their best shot. It was nothing compared to the power of God. The resurrection and the subsequent explosion of the Christian movement was a clear indication that God was, is, and always will be the ultimate power.

c. **Forgiveness of God** – The cross is the moment in time when everything changed. Following a bunch of rules no longer was the formula to getting right with God (Philippians 3:7-11). Now, we simply need to accept the gift of salvation offered by Jesus as He hung on that cross. We need to die to self (Galatians 2:20) and give the rest of our lives over to God to use as He sees fit.

8. At the start of the sermon, Pastor Steve talked about our need to define our relationships, to take stock of where we are and what our expectations might be for the future. In your next quiet time, sit down with God and together define your relationship. Select one of the passages above and consider what it says to you as far as what you do and who you are today, tomorrow, and for the rest of your life.

Challenge your group (or yourself, if you are doing this as an individual study) to undertake this Lenten study as a time to reflect on the meaning of the cross to each person individually. We see crosses all the time. Now we need to catch a vision of “the” cross and ponder its significance.