The Wonder of the Cross

Title message and second in the series, The Wonder of the Cross

# Scripture: Galatians 6:14

# Key thought: We marvel at God’s amazing plan.

# Intro:

As the Lenten season draws nearer to its close, the cross of Jesus comes into closer focus. It is a momentous historical event, the import of which we cannot escape. For us as Christians, there is a sense of awe and wonder as we contemplate the cross of Jesus.

John Bunyan tried to capture a little of this in his famous novel, one of the most famous writings in the English language, Pilgrim’s Progress. It is the account of a dream about the pilgrimage of a man named Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. The Pilgrim leaves the City of Destruction with a terrible weight upon his back, the weight of his sin and guilt. Part-way through his journey he arrives at a cross where something wonderful happens.

(read from pages 40,41)

The question for us this morning is this. What is the Wonder of the Cross for you? Allow me to suggest three facets of the Wonder of the Cross upon which we can meditate.

# Unimaginable divine cost

Paul’s greeting to the church in Galatia begins with a reminder of the tremendous price that Jesus paid as he fulfilled his Father’s will, in order that all the benefits of salvation might come to us. Paul writes;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Gal 1:3-5 NIV

In chapter 4, verse four, Paul reminds us that the cross was God’s plan for redeeming us, even though it was an unbelievably costly strategy for God and for his Son. Paul pens;

When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Gal 4:4-5 NIV

The favorite verse of so many, John 3:16, also focuses on the fact that God gave his Son in order that we might not perish but have everlasting life. In chapter two of Galatians, Paul puts Jesus’ sacrifice on a personal level for each one of us when he testifies;

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Gal 2:20 NIV

Those of us who have been studying in John’s Gospel have noted that Jesus was careful to help the disciples understand that the misfortunes that befell him – being betrayed, falling into the hands of the arresting soldiers sent by the Jews, being tried by Pilate, even being crucified – none of these things surprised him. He knew what was coming. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the arresting party arrived, Peter drew the sword to defend him, Jesus described his attitude.

Jesus commanded Peter, “Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?” John 18:11 NIV

It wasn’t just that Jesus died in the way that a war hero dies on behalf on his country. The war hero’s actions are full of valor and demand our highest respect. But Jesus’ death on our behalf goes even further. In some way that we cannot fully comprehend, he bore our sins. His suffering was not just physical but spiritual as well. In Galatians, Paul thought about the curse of death which has rested on all our race because of sin ever since Adam’s fall and Paul expressed what Jesus has done this way;

***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" Gal 3:13 NRSV***

Jesus did not deserve the punishment that he took for us. As Isaiah prophesied:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53:6 NIV

The first reason we stop in amazement at the story of the cross is the tremendous cost that was paid on our behalf.

# Unfathomed human reach

Paul also wants to impress upon his readers the great reach of the Good News. The Jews, like most of us had a hard time thinking beyond their own group. Paul begins by reminding us:

God does not show favoritism (Gal. 2:6)

He then explains how the Good News of salvation was not just for the Jews to whom Jesus originally spoke, but also for all the Gentiles. Paul concludes by affirming that people of all races and nationalities and both male and female are equal before God. All become spiritual children of God through faith in Christ. Paul wrote:

So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:26-28 NIV

Not only does the cross of Jesus reach out equally to male and female, Jew and Gentile, and all different races; it also reaches all economic strata, the cultured and the uncultured, the rich and the beggars – all were touched by Jesus. In the ministry of Jesus, the message of repentance and new birth came to the upper crust as Jesus spoke to people like Nicodemus. Then Jesus reached out to the begging lepers and the blind beside the road. He opened the word to a woman at the well who had had five husbands and was currently living with another man. Jesus did not reject the woman caught in adultery but offered forgiveness and a second chance. He spoke to the teachers of the law and to the tax collector Zacchaeus, always looking for “whosoever will” (Mark 8:34) and calling them to hear and respond.

The reach of the Jesus’ work of salvation is indeed unfathomable. In fact, Paul asserts that when the work of salvation is complete, when Jesus returns, even the creation itself will benefit in a huge way from the transforming passion and resurrection of Jesus.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. Rom 8:19-21 NIV

[In a passage both difficult to translate and more difficult to understand, Peter drops a hint that during the passion and resurrection of Jesus, he somehow even reached out to people of past ages (1 Peter 3:18-20). Talk about unfathomed reach!]

So, a second reason that we marvel at what God has done is the tremendous reach of the cross.

# Unparalleled life results

## Not the old legalism or dead ritual

Jesus himself was careful to make it clear that if his teaching and example and the New Covenant in operation did not result in a different kind of religion than the legalism of the Pharisees, then it would have failed.

I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matt 5:20 NRSV

Even the prophets of the Old Testament had spoken against a cold practicing of Old Covenant religion that was only external and devoid of heart.

The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Isa 29:13 NIV

Jesus continued that lesson. Faith could not be simply empty ritual or dead words and creeds.

Another dead-end religious habit we have is this: we tend to look around us and interpret our lives by looking at the lives of others. If we think we are better than others than we think we are okay. I like what Henry Blackaby says about this habit of ours.

Don't interpret the Scriptures by your experience; interpret your experience by the word of God! Raise your experience to the level of what God promises. (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 133)

## A New Creation

The kind of faith in God that Jesus came to bring was to result in unprecedented creative and effective results in people’s lives. Our faith in God, our practice of faith had to change us from the inside out. It had to be a fulfillment of what the prophet Ezekiel had written,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. Ezek. 36:26-27 NIV

Paul wrote to the Galatian church about this new creation that is happening in the hearts of those who follow Jesus.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Gal 6:15 NIV

Circumcision was a Jewish custom handed down from Abraham. It was an exterior sign, but it did nothing to change the heart. Paul was pointing out that under the new covenant it didn’t matter whether you were Jewish and circumcised or Gentile and uncircumcised, what mattered was whether your heart was being changed by God.

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 2 Cor 5:17 NIV

As followers of Jesus we are being changed as a result of what Jesus did on the cross. It’s not just knowing the facts, it’s as we identify with Jesus, die to ourselves and come alive to God. Henry Blackaby explains it this way.

Getting a mental grip on these truths is crucial but the mental grip won't change your life. You and I need to actually experience this phenomenon of being crucified with Jesus. The cross in the Christian's life does something radical. The more you know and understand what God was doing for you – and what the alternative was if he hadn't – the more impossible it is to live your life unto yourself. It's a spiritual impossibility – once you understand the cross, a selfish, self-centered life is simply no longer an option.(Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross pages 66 and 67)

The cross becomes not just a reminder of Jesus, but a symbol that fits with some of the changes that God is working our own lives. Some bad behaviors are being extinguished, put to death, because Jesus died so that our own sinful self is no longer in control. Some new acts of service are gladly borne for Jesus even though they are difficult because we are taking up our cross and following him. The cross of Jesus changes us for the better both ways!

## Renewed minds

Paul wrote in Romans that one result in our lives of the Holy Spirit’s active presence is a renewing of our minds. Over time, we no longer think the same old ways. This one way we are changed as we follow Jesus. Paul wrote:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Rom 12:2

Henry Blackaby explains;

Our sin nature is that controlling tendency that keeps drawing us away from God. But when we become a Christian, we die to sin as the dominating factor in our behavior. In every area where we experience moral failure and addiction and defeat, in every area where we simply cannot help ourselves, we can now find absolute, radical victory over sin.(Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 122)

Paul explained the concept of change in our lives in his writing to Corinth with a different metaphor.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Cor 3:17-18 NIV

So, Paul says we are being changed by the influence of the light of God’s presence shining into our lives. Spiritual disciplines of Bible study, regular worship, prayer, and serving and teaching others, all contribute to this new way of thinking. What is one overall goal of this transformation?

## Faith expressing itself through love

Those of us in the John study have been impressed with the commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34-35 NIV

Jesus identified one of the main results of his work that he desired to see in our lives as his followers. Paul caught that vision and expressed it his letter to the Galatians.

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. Gal 5:6 NIV

It is not knowledge of his teaching that Jesus wanted, though that is a good thing. What Jesus really desired is that we would truly learn to love each other in practical ways.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, let’s take a moment to take to heart what Paul is teaching. This is the take-it-home moment. What does the “Wonder of the Cross” mean to You?

Take time to ask God to open your mind and heart to the reality of what Paul kept talking about: I have been crucified with Christ… Christ lives in me… I boast only in the cross of Christ… I know only Christ and him crucified… The message of the cross is the power of God. You and I must ask ourselves some crucial questions: How is the cross affecting my life? Is my life centered on the cross? Is that the reality – not just in my "theology," but in my experience? (Henry Blackaby in Experiencing the Cross p. 73)