

THE MIRACLES OF THE CROSS



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Dear Friends,

When we look at the Cross we see Christ hanging there on 'Good Friday'. We know that He gave His life for us in the ultimate sacrifice to forgive us for our sins and to open up the way to a deeper relationship with the Father. But how often do we go deeper than that? For this act of supreme love on the Cross has many implications on our lives if we take the time to look at it more closely.

This study aims to do just that – to examine the Cross and what it means to us in greater detail. So we look at reconciliation, sacrifice, justice, freedom, participation, confronting power, suffering and glory all in the light of the Cross. Jesus' sacrifice was complete – He needed no help from anyone and He only needed to make it once. He freely gave His life for every person that has lived, is living and will live in the future. It was an awesome, single act of love and He did it especially for you and for me.

As we journey through this Lent, we pray that you will attain a deeper understanding of just what Jesus did for you on the Cross and how your life is changed because of His gift of supreme love. As you discover new depths of this love, may it touch you deeply and grow your relationship with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I am indebted to Tom Smail's book, 'Windows on the Cross' for the background information contained in this booklet.

May God bless you as you journey with Him through the next few weeks.

Mandy

Paul made it clear that it took the Cross on Calvary to change people from God's enemies to His friends (Romans 5:10). New Testament writers made the forgiveness of sin the focus of grace and love as they wrote about Jesus' death on the Cross, but today people are less concerned about sin. They think they are okay and they do not see the relevance of reconciliation. Others vaguely recognize their need to be reconciled with God but believe that God is compassionate and will readily forgive sin. Christ dying for our sins does not have the same impact it has had in previous centuries on previous generations.

We think of God as a God of love and tend not to consider His anger, seeing it as an Old Testament characteristic. But both John the Baptist and Paul speak of God's anger (John 3:36; Romans 5). It may seem that God's love and His anger are contradictory characteristics but this is not the case as there are times when love has to be tough – and God's love is tough! It will not accept any compromise. The one who loves the most always makes the first move and goes out of their way to bring about reconciliation. God did not wait for us to repent but showed us His love in that '*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*' (Romans 5:8). God's willingness to forgive us was the reason Calvary happened (John 3:16). He took the initiative and did everything necessary to restore the relationship (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Jesus took all the evil of this world and transformed it by offering Himself to God as a sacrifice on our behalf. When the Father looks at the Cross He sees His love mirrored back to Him out of the darkness of sin and death. Jesus surrounded everything that is evil with His love so that God's peace, reconciliation and friendship are available for us to this day. God's willingness to be reconciled carries the risk that He may be rejected. It seemed as if this is what happened when Jesus was crucified. Yet the miracle of the Cross is that it enabled God and people to be reconciled. This is evident when Jesus said to the Father, '*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*' (Luke 23:34) and later said to the criminal beside Him, '*Today you will be with Me in paradise*' (Luke 23:43). These words have echoed down the centuries to apply to us too.

It is only when we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus that we begin to realize our need for the Cross and for the reconciliation it brings. '*All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ ... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God*' (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20)

Family Time

Chat as a family about an argument each of you has had where reconciliation has happened. Why did you make up? Why does God want us to make up with Him?

Daily Readings

Sunday

Romans 5:6-8

Spend some time in God's presence and feel His love wash over you. Ask Him to help you in this if it is a struggle for you.

Response: Lord, I ask for deep revelation and understanding of Your covenant love which is strong and everlasting as I seek to come into Your presence today.

Monday

Romans 5:9-11

Consider your level of gratitude to Christ for His gift of reconciliation. How does the amount of gratitude you have make you feel? Do you really appreciate His gift to you?

Reflect: You made the ultimate sacrifice on my behalf. Thank You for the Cross, Lord, the price You paid, the nail-scarred hands, the cleansing blood that heals and reconciles.

Tuesday

John 3:16-17

What feelings do these words prompt deep within you? Tell God about them.

Meditation: Amazing love, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now I am found, was blind and now I see! Hallelujah!

Wednesday

John 3:36

Where do you stand in light of this verse? Where do your loved ones stand? Pray for yourself and those you love now.

Response: Lord, You are the light of my salvation, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Touch my life and the lives of my loved ones afresh in a new way.

Thursday

Luke 23:34

Listen to Jesus saying these words to the Father on your behalf. How do you feel about this?

Who do you need to forgive in the same way?

Response: Lord Jesus, You sought forgiveness for those who abused, mistreated and rejected You. Today I choose to follow this example by forgiving those who have hurt me.

Friday

Luke 23:43

Listen to Jesus promising you paradise when your life on this earth comes to an end. How will this change the way you are living every day?

Response: Praise the Lord! My faith and belief in Christ Jesus and understanding of grace and mercy hold the guarantee and promise of eternal life.

Saturday

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Is Jesus making this appeal to you – or do you need to make it on behalf of others? Pray for yourself and for others in your life as you have need.

Response: As Christ's ambassador I choose to walk in the ministry of reconciliation.

Session 1

Welcome: What is the most meaningful act of reconciliation you have witnessed? Why did it mean so much to you?

Worship:

Accountability: What are you going to do in regard to your relationship with Jesus to make this Lent a special, different time to your ordinary, everyday life?

Word:

Read: Romans 5:6-11

I. What Scripture have you read recently that spoke clearly to you in a new way?

2. Most of us have people in our lives who have hurt us at some time or another. Where do you need reconciliation in your life with God or others?
3. How do you feel about making the first move? Why do you feel this way?
 - a. If you are reluctant what would need to happen to help you to change your mind?
 - b. If you are happy to make the first move, what is stopping you from doing so?
 - c. If you have taken the first move – what has happened?
4. How can the group encourage you to bring about reconciliation?

Ministry to Each Other

Pray for one another in regard to reconciliation – with God, with others – that you too may be able to say ‘I have been forgiven, help me, Lord, to forgive and reconcile.’

Reaching Out

How can you help to bring about reconciliation between colleagues, friends or family members where there is conflict? Pray about this during the week and take action where you can.

Digging Deeper – alone or with your group

1. Choose one of the daily readings and spend some time in quietness letting God speak to you through the Scripture.
2. What do you think about Paul’s comments that we are God’s enemies until we are in relationship with Jesus? Does it make sense to you or do you object to it? Why?
3. If you can find a copy of Tom Smail’s book ‘Windows on the Cross’, read chapter 2: Reconciliation.

As distasteful as the Jewish Temple ritual of animal sacrifice may be to us today, for the New Testament writers it was an everyday event. They were used to it. However, Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross was unique for them as they saw Jesus as both Sacrifice and Priest (Hebrews 7:27).

The writers compared Jesus to the Passover lambs which were slaughtered annually to commemorate the protection given to Israel from the Angel of Death prior to their departure from Egypt (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19; Exodus 12:21-28). As the New Testament writers considered the events of the Cross they began to see Jesus' death as the ultimate sacrifice (Hebrews 9:26). It was evident that sacrificing animals was not a long term solution for it could not take away sins and had to be undertaken annually (Hebrews 10:4). But they understood that Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross was a unique single event that never needed to be repeated.



Jesus' intense love for the Father overcame His reluctance to suffer what He knew lay ahead of Him (Luke 22:42). He intentionally poured out His life in an act of supreme love for His Father on humanity's behalf, opening up the way for the restoration of relationship and commitment to God that was originally planned for all people.

Ordinary people crucified Jesus and the Cross shows them at their worst. Every sin committed is a rebellion against God. Jesus followed the Father's will in life and in death.

His final words, '*Into Your hands I commend My spirit*' (Luke 23:46) perfectly completed the sacrifice He made; and the Cross on which He hung was turned into an altar that showed God at His best (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). As Jesus gave His life and released His healing power, His blood, shed in such a cruel way on the Cross, washed away the ugliness and horror of sin and grace flooded the world. Every time we share Holy Communion we are reminded of this.

We remember that Jesus is the Living God who once again offers us the gift of salvation, cleansing us of sin through His supreme sacrifice on the Cross (Hebrews 7:24-25). When we accept the purifying gift at the Table, we offer ourselves in worship and obedience, thanksgiving and praise and our relationship with Him grows (Romans 12:1-3).

Family Time

Have a look at your toys – choose one or two and give them away to someone who needs them (bring them to Children's Church if you would like to and they will pass them on).

Daily Readings

Sunday

Hebrews 7:23-28

What is the repeated sin in your life for which Jesus gave Himself once and for all? How does this awareness change your attitude to this sin?

Response: Lord I receive the gift of forgiveness, grace and salvation by faith today. I respond in gratitude, ask for forgiveness and choose to turn away from repeated sin.

Monday

John 1:29

John recognized Jesus immediately as the One who takes away the sins of the world. Are you able to accept the fact that He takes away your sin through His sacrifice on the Cross – or do you struggle with this? Whatever your answer why do you feel the way you do?

Response: Lord, open my spiritual eyes. Give me a heart of understanding to embrace the truth that You paid the full price of my sin when You went to the Cross.

Tuesday

1 Peter 1:17-21

This is further affirmation that Christ died for you. Spend some time in prayer and praise, thanking Him for His great gift to you.

Response: Eternal, loving and all-knowing Father God, thank You for Your plan of redemption set in motion and fulfilled through Your precious Son, Jesus Christ, on my behalf!

Wednesday

Hebrews 10:1-10

Spend some time in silence and wonder that Christ came to do the Father's will – and that the Father's will was that He gave Himself for you on the Cross.

Reflection: Jesus' sacrificial obedience and submission to the Father has bought me freedom and pardon from sin. I rejoice in my salvation.

Thursday

Hebrews 9:23-28

Worship the Lord for He has done everything through His sacrifice for you on the Cross to take away the sin of the world.

Response: Through the cleansing, healing covenant blood sacrifice of Jesus I can enter boldly and confidently into His presence. I worship You, Lord – there is none like You.

Friday

Luke 22:42

What is God asking you to do that is difficult for you at the moment? Ask Him for the strength and courage to follow His plan for you, however hard it may look from your vantage point.

Response: Let me not be found wanting as I seek to submit to and obey Your will and instruction. Strengthen my commitment to do Your will.

Saturday

Luke 23:45-49

Christ's sacrifice fulfilled Scripture. Praise Him who loves you so much that He was prepared to go through the agony of the Cross for you.

Response: Lord, Your love is amazing, steady and unchanging. Hallelujah!

Session 2

Welcome: When have you personally witnessed an act of sacrifice that took your breath away? Share the story briefly with the group.

Worship:

Accountability: Were you able to diffuse a situation and bring about some form of reconciliation between people you work with or members of your family or friends? What happened?

Word: Read: Hebrews 10:1-10

1. Which reading spoke to you most deeply this week?
2. What sacrifice do you make as a result of your relationship with God? How does it show your love for Him?
3. Spend a moment thinking about what Jesus sacrificed on the Cross for you. How do you feel about this great act of love?
4. Are you able to accept that Jesus gave His life for you and that you are now 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'? Share with the group your thoughts and feelings in this regard.

Ministry to Each Other

As you pray together bringing your requests to God now, ask for God's gift of assurance for those amongst you who are not certain that Jesus' sacrifice is for each one of you.

Reaching Out

Look for an opportunity to serve someone else this week in a way that is outside your comfort zone and involves some sacrifice of effort on your part.

Digging Deeper – alone or with your group

1. Read Hebrews 10:1-10 in a variety of Biblical translations. (you can find a huge selection of translations on the website www.biblehub.com on the Parallel page). Spend time with this passage. What is God saying to you here?
2. If you have a copy of Tom Smail's book, 'Windows on the Cross', read Chapter 3: Sacrifice
3. Using a journal or notebook, write down a prayer of praise for the sacrifice that Jesus made to you and tell Him what it means to you.

It may be that we have asked ourselves how justice and mercy can link together. The answer to the question can be found in the Cross.

People like to think of God as being merciful rather than as someone who doles out justice. For many it is an uncomfortable thought that they will one day stand in God's court before the Judge and they prefer not to think about it. But only those who have a relationship with Jesus will receive a verdict of 'not guilty' rather than 'guilty'. We may think of God as being either merciful or just, but, in fact, these qualities are complementary rather than in opposition to one another for He is both merciful and just in everything He does (Isaiah 45:21). His role as Judge is not the same as that of a human judge for He always does right by His people, keeps His side of His covenant with them and enables them to fulfil His plans as they worship and serve Him and love one another.

Jesus emphasized that the Law was a gift, not a set of rules. It points the way to loving God and one another and to developing life as it was meant to be. God's judgment means He steps aside and lets those who reject Him live their own way. For such people there is judgment and condemnation for a Godless society degenerates into self-destruction through lawlessness and selfishness. So Paul writes '*the wages of sin is death*' (Romans 6:23). However this is only half the story for the verse continues '*... but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*'. The final result of God's justice is that it gives mercy to all those who need it and who accept God as Saviour.

If this is the case, then we may find ourselves asking what Jesus' role on the Cross actually was. God does not want to punish sin so much as to cancel it and rescue His people from it (John 3:17). His justice is one of salvation and He dispenses love and mercy through it. God does not desire compensation or retribution for sin but rather seeks to break its grip and power over us. Jesus never sinned so sin had no hold on Him when He hung on the Cross. Jesus' healing power was released at that moment and so there is new life even in death. Through Jesus' sacrifice God gives the gift of new life which has died to sin. This new life, is right with God and will continue to do right by God as we deal with one another just as Paul described when he wrote '*count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Jesus Christ*' (Romans 6:11).

Karl Barth stated that Jesus was condemned to death in human courts. But in the supreme court of God, to which Jesus appealed with His last words, God reversed the verdict, decreeing that Jesus should live. Luke wrote '*... You, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the Cross. But God raised Him from the dead*' (Acts 2:23). Our hope rests in the two words 'But God' for it is on God's saving justice that we rely as that reversed judgment applied not only to Jesus but to all who trust and follow Him.

Family Time

As a family talk about what is fair for everybody to have (use human rights as a guideline – check the website <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/plain.asp> for a simpler, plain language version). Take a drive and talk about where you see justice and where you see injustice.

Daily Readings

Sunday

Isaiah 45:18-25

Where or when have you experienced God's justice and mercy?

Response: Lord, I praise and thank You that mercy triumphs over judgment. Restore righteousness, joy and peace in my life.

Monday

Romans 6:15-23

Praise God for His forgiveness that whatever we have done in the past or may do in the future, He is prepared to give us the gift of eternal life.

Response: Praise God, sin is no longer my master! I have been redeemed, equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit to resist the devil and he will flee from me.

Tuesday

Romans 6:11-14

How do you feel about living under Grace rather than Law?

Response: Praise God, I have Christ in me, the Hope of Glory. Touched by His grace I can live a life free of bondage, sin and death.

Wednesday

Acts 3:11-16

Paul accused the ordinary men and women listening to him of putting Jesus to death, but God raised Him to life. What hope do the words 'but God' give to you?

Response: Lord, my confidence and hope are in Your resurrection power and authority given to heal, restore and redeem in Jesus' name.

Thursday

Psalm 86:1-4

What is it about which you are crying out for mercy to God at the moment? Spend a short while in silence to hear what He is saying to you.

Response: Holy Spirit, quicken my spirit, strengthen my devotion and deepen my trust in You as I listen for Your voice today.

Friday

1 John 1:5-10

Thank God for His mercy and His justice.

Response: I praise You Lord, for You are faithful and just to forgive me and cleanse me from sin.

Saturday

Revelation 15:1-4

Meditate on the song of Moses and the Lamb in these verses. Read it line by line and think about what it means – then tell God about it.

Response: How marvelous are Your deeds, O God. How just are Your ways. I glorify Your name – for You alone are holy and worthy of all praise.

Session 3

Welcome: How close have you come to getting into trouble with the law? How did you feel?

Worship:

Accountability: How were you able to serve beyond your comfort zone this last week?

Word: Read: Isaiah 45:18-25; I John 1:5-10

1. Which reading did God especially use to speak to you this week?
2. In the background information above we read: 'God does not desire compensation or retribution for sin but rather seeks to break its grip and power over us.' Does this statement help you to see the Cross in a new way? How does it throw new light on the Cross for you?
3. Can you reconcile this statement with both justice and mercy? Share your thoughts.
4. What does it mean to you to know that God is both merciful and just, rather than just one or the other?
5. Do you feel at this point in time that your greatest need is justice – or mercy – or do you need both?

Ministry to Each Other

Pray that God will give you the wisdom, the courage and the grace to be both merciful and just in everyday situations that occur – and an assurance that you follow a God who is both just and merciful.

Reaching Out

How can you extend mercy and justice to someone this week?

Digging Deeper – alone or with your group

1. Spend some time in silence and ask God to show you where you need His justice and His mercy. Listen for Him to show you. A Scripture may come to mind, or an idea of something you need to do, or an apology to make. Make any confession that comes to mind; take any action you feel is required; and then spend time praising Him for His mercy, His justice and His faithfulness, knowing that you have been 'cleansed of all unrighteousness'.
2. If you have a copy of 'Windows on the Cross' read Chapter 4: Justice

The story of the exodus is central to the Old Testament just as the story of the crucifixion is central to the New Testament. In both cases, God showed people what He is prepared to do to give them freedom.

Jesus Himself declared that He had come to set prisoners free (Luke 4:18). Jesus is quoted in Matthew's Gospel, *'This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'* (Matthew 26:28). The word used for 'forgiveness' is the Greek word *aphesis* which can be translated 'release' or 'liberate' and so the phrase can be '*... My blood of the new covenant poured out for many to release them from their sins.*'

Jesus, the One who was free of sin, offered us the gift of freedom as He hung on the Cross. He gave His life as a ransom for everyone (Mark 10:45). At that time, slaves could only be freed by the payment of a ransom so this concept would have been understood. It is ironic that crucifixion was the means by which runaway slaves were put to death. Jesus knew the Cross was the one place where He could fulfil the purpose for which He came.

Today, we tend to think that we are liberated. It is not easy for us to admit that we are slaves to sin, but we live in a broken world and instead of loving God, our neighbour and then ourselves we put ourselves first and God last. 'This is a pretty good definition of sin' says Tom Smail in his book 'Windows on the Cross'. We repeatedly find that our desires, habits and greed have a firm hold on us.

Paul too wrote that we are slaves to sin. He was not passing judgment but rather taking stock of himself. He knew that we deceive ourselves and do not want to be honest with ourselves. We serve our own interests and put ourselves first. Paul was a good man and yet he admitted that he made wrong choices (Romans 7:18-20) and it was only because of Christ that he had been freed (Romans 7:24-25).

There is nothing we can do to free ourselves from the slavery of sin. But there is nothing that can hold us as slaves when Christ comes into our lives offering us freedom for '*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*' (John 8:36).

Family Time

Spend some time at a fun park where you can be free. Enjoy the day together.

Daily Readings

Sunday

Luke 4:18-19

In what areas of your life do you feel imprisoned or restrained? Give these areas to God in the light of this verse.

Response: *Thank You, Jesus. You came to set the captives free – I acknowledge the areas in which I am held captive and receive release and deliverance from bondage in Your name!*

Monday

Matthew 26:28

Every time we share in Communion, we are reminded that Jesus gave His life for the forgiveness of our sins. What has Communion meant to you up to now? Does thinking about this verse change that perception?

Reflection: *There is a divine and holy exchange that takes place as I realize that Jesus' death reveals I am deeply loved, cherished and acceptable in the Father's eyes.*

Tuesday

Mark 10:45

For whom would you be prepared to stand as ransom? Praise Jesus Christ, our Lord, that He was willing to do that for you.

Response: *Lord, I am challenged by Your life of loving service and commitment to others. Help me to follow Your example.*

Wednesday

Romans 7:14-20

Where do you find this is the case in your life?

Response: *Lord, I acknowledge my sinful nature and thank You for the sacrificial love that has delivered me and enables me to resist and overcome the temptation to keep sinning.*

Thursday

Romans 7:24-25

Give thanks and praise to God for rescuing you from this life and death dilemma through Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross.

Response: *Praise God that through His grace and resurrection power I am not bound by law but set free. Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit I will seek to obey Him.*

Friday

John 8:34-38

Are you a slave to sin or has Jesus set you free? Do you have room for God's word? Let verse 36 sink into your soul as you read it slowly a few times.

Response: *Lord, help me to appropriate the freedom from sin You have already accomplished on my behalf.*

Saturday

Romans 8:1-4

When you are in Christ there is no condemnation! Are you able to forgive yourself for the things you have done? Ask for God's help here if your answer is no. Otherwise praise Him for your freedom.

Commitment: *I choose to embrace my freedom and will no longer follow my sinful nature but follow the leading of the Holy Spirit instead.*

Session 4

Welcome: Where do you go to experience freedom? Why is this place special to you?
Worship:
Accountability: How did you try to extend justice and mercy this week? What happened?
Word: Read: John 8:34-38; Romans 8:1-4

1. Which reading challenged you the most this week?
2. What do you think enslaves our society today?
3. What holds you back from taking brave steps of faith? Share one fear or concern you may have that prevents you from serving God more fully than you are doing at the moment.
(If this question does not apply to you and you are serving God wholeheartedly, praise God that He has grown your trust in Him and give Him thanks for His faithfulness).
4. What would need to happen for you to know that Jesus has set you free – from sin, from fear, from whatever restrains you?
5. How can the group help you?

Ministry to Each Other

Pray for one another in the light of your discussion – spend time ministering to those who are struggling with the concept that Jesus has set them free through the Cross.

Reaching Out

How can you share your sense of freedom in Christ with others outside the group this week?

Digging Deeper – alone or with your group

1. How does what Jesus has done on the Cross (and continues to do for us in Holy Communion) release us from our sins?
2. In silence, spend time asking God to show you what is chaining you and holding you back from celebrating the absolute freedom that Jesus brings us. Listen for His voice. When you set aside time for Him, He will speak to you through Scripture, your thoughts or through someone else. Expect to hear Him. And when you do, ask Him to assure you that those chains are broken too and that you are free indeed.
3. Meditate on 2:Timothy 1:7 and/or 1 John 4:18
4. If you have Tom Smail's book 'Windows on the Cross' read chapter 5: Freedom

The Cross of Jesus has great implications for those who follow Him. When Peter tried to reassure Jesus that He would never be killed, Jesus rebuked Peter and told him that all who followed Him would have to take up their own cross (Mark 8:31-35).

Jesus went to the Cross alone (Matthew 26:56) and there was no part anyone could play in the work He did there. All His friends and family could do was watch helplessly from a distance (John 19:25-26). His gifts of love and salvation for people were accomplished when He cried '*It is finished*'. It was through these gifts alone that He reconciled us to God, shared our suffering and won the victory over evil. And having accomplished the task, He shows us the way we need to take as we draw closer to God. Bold Peter stepped forward on another occasion and stated that he would die for Christ. Again he was reprimanded by Jesus. This time Jesus told him that the day would come when Peter would die for Him – but Jesus had to die for Peter first.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book 'The Cost of Discipleship' made the distinction between cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace is accepting all that Jesus did on the Cross without making any effort to change; anticipating forgiveness without repentance; and expecting God's acceptance without trying to follow God's commands. Cheap grace moves directly to Easter Sunday and Pentecost without facing up to the Cross on Good Friday. It expects an easy road without the challenges of life.

Costly grace, on the other hand, is freely given to those who truly want to relate to Jesus and do so through the Cross. Costly grace demands everything of those who receive it. Often when we are prepared to follow Christ in this way on the path to new resurrection life we find we are closest to Him when we experience pain and suffering. Paul himself discovered this and wrote about it to the Philippians '*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead*' (Philippians 3:10-11).

There are three attributes to taking up our cross and following Jesus:

Self-denial – A life that denies itself and is dedicated to Christ bears fruit (John 12:24-25).

Persecution – Jesus warned His followers that they could expect persecution of some form or another because of their faith (John 15:18-20; Acts 17:32; I Corinthians 1:23).

Selfless love – those who take up their cross and follow Jesus shine with love as they follow the example Jesus set when He hung on the Cross, and lives are changed (Luke 23:34; I Peter 2:1-23).

Jesus does not leave us to do any of this alone but empowers us to become like Him and follow Him (Galatians 2:20). As Christ works with us we discover that evil no longer has the strong hold on us that it had, but rather we are slaves to the love that Jesus displayed on the Cross. We become aware of our own personal experience of death to sin and of the new life that Christ gained for us there (Romans 6:3-4; 6:10-11).

Family Time

Talk about what each one of you can do for Jesus this week and encourage one another to do it.

Sunday

Mark 8:31-35

What does Jesus mean when He says to you that you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him?

Response: Lord, I let go of my ego and my selfish ambitions. Will You be the author of all my plans, dreams and aspirations?

Monday

Matthew 26:56

When the opportunity arises where you can stand up for Jesus, do you do it or do you remain silent – or run away?

Response: Help me, Lord to meet the challenge to stand up for You with boldness, courage, firm commitment, grace and humility. Forgive me for the times I have failed to do so.

Tuesday

John 19:16-26

What talents have you received? How are you using them?

Response: Thank You Lord for gracing me with gifts and talents. Help me to use them to glorify the Father and extend His kingdom purposes as I appropriate them in daily life.

Wednesday

Philippians 3:7-11

Paul shared his desires for his faith with the Philippians. What are your hopes for your faith?

Response: Holy Spirit, teach me to value my relationship with Jesus Christ more than anything else. Let this be my ultimate life goal.

Affirmation: Christ in me, the Hope of Glory.

Thursday

John 15:18-29

We all meet people who do not agree with or understand our faith in Christ. How do you respond to such people?

Response: Lord, in the midst of opposition help me in my faith journey. I choose to keep my eyes on Jesus and stand on His promises as I share my faith with unbelievers.

Friday

1 Peter 2:18-25

What does verse 21 mean to you personally?

Response: Lord, in the face of suffering, unjust treatment and trying circumstances my goal is to follow Christ's example and simply entrust myself into the Father's hands.

Saturday

Romans 6:3-4

Following Christ is a growing process. How have you changed recently as you follow Him?

Response: Thank You Jesus for the growth and maturity evident in my life since I surrendered to Your Lordship over my life.

Declaration: I'm alive with Christ – a new creation – Hallelujah!

Welcome: When have you taken up a free offer – only to find there was a sting in the tail?
Worship:
Accountability: How did you share your sense of freedom in Christ with others this week?
Word: Read: Mark 8:31-35; Romans 6:3-4

1. How did God speak to you through the readings this week?
2. When we follow Christ, He leads us into new experiences and forms us into the people He designed us to be. How have you changed in the last year or so as you have followed Christ?
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks of ‘cheap grace’ and ‘costly grace’. Discuss these two concepts of grace in regard to your own life.
4. Where is God asking you to participate in His Kingdom at this point in time? How do you feel about this?
5. How can the group encourage and help you to participate in God’s call on your life?

Ministry to Each Other

Pray for one another – what can you do as a group to help each other to participate more actively in the Kingdom of God?

Reaching Out

As we approach Holy Week (beginning on Palm Sunday) how can you reach out to someone in a way that expresses ‘costly grace’ by moving out of your comfort zone and trusting God as you take action in a new way that takes some effort on your part?

Digging Deeper – alone or with your group

1. Consider what, in practical terms, you understand by ‘take up your Cross and follow Me’ and how it applies to you at this time.
2. Read:
 - a. ‘The Cost of Discipleship’ by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
 - b. ‘Costly Grace: A Contemporary View of Bonhoeffer’s The Cost of Discipleship’ by Jon Walker and Rick Warren
 - c. ‘Windows on the Cross’ by Tom Smail Chapter 8: Participation
3. Jon Walker in his book ‘Costly Grace: A Contemporary View of Bonhoeffer’s The Cost of Discipleship’ writes ‘grace is free but will cost us everything’. What does this mean to you?

To those who do not know Jesus Christ as Saviour, the Cross makes Him look like a loser. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey – not exactly a strong leader's choice. And yet the leaders of the time were concerned at His popularity and His message and so within a few days He was arrested. It seems as if He had no option, no escape route, and His enemies killed Him. They had apparently won – or had they?

In fact, the Cross of Jesus has both a passive and an active perspective. Crucifixion was something that Jesus underwent at the hands of the authorities of His day; but it was also a course of action that He chose to take for it had the power to change everything for everyone throughout eternity. John makes it clear in his Gospel that Jesus was in control of all that happened.

Jesus was lifted up on the Cross to die; He was raised from death to life; and now sits at the right hand of the Father to reign. His cry 'It is finished' is one of triumph. He has won the victory. Paul spoke of this triumph when he wrote to the Colossians (2:15) and said that Jesus disarmed His enemies and triumphed over them through the Cross. He wrote about it again to the Ephesians, '*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*' (Ephesians 6:12). The Roman authorities and the Jewish priests were used by these evil forces in an attempt to frustrate God's plan, but in fact they were used to fulfil it as Christ overcame them by His death on the Cross.

We are accosted every day by the values and influence of the society in which we live. Most of us would go for a more up-market form of transport than the 21st century equivalent of a donkey. This daily assault on us makes it hard to follow Christ. But this is the battle Jesus won for us personally on the Cross. We share in His victory and are guided through the battles we experience by Christ, who uses them for our redemption. Jesus experienced emotional and spiritual suffering on the Cross as well as the physical pain that He endured. Every force in hell was flung against Him – and so every force in hell was defeated by Him on the day He rose from the dead. Whatever evil confronts us – whether global or personal – Christ has won the victory for us on the Cross.

But although the crucifixion was a violent event, Jesus did not retaliate with violence for to do so would have been to use evil's own weapons against them. Stripped of His own divine power and the protection such power would have offered He faced them as a vulnerable Man. He opposed them with the only weapon left to Him – love – and it is love that is the only thing that could win the victory of Calvary. Love is undefeated because God is love. As we give our lives to Christ, we can share in the victory won by that love. The Cross does not offer us exemption from the evil or suffering of the world, but it does give us the guarantee that we will always discover the love of God in such circumstances. Such love heals, liberates, brings justice and grows the people of God. So we can approach the Cross of Jesus Christ full of praise for here is an apparently defeated man who has become the victorious life-giving Redeemer through His work on the Cross at Calvary. Hallelujah



Family Time

Read the Palm Sunday story together (John 12:12-19). If you were there who would you be? What are you seeing and feeling?

Daily Readings

Sunday

Colossians 2:9-15

How do you respond when you think of the awesome power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead being released in and through you?

Response: *Praise God! In Christ I have everything I need for salvation and right-living and I share in the divine nature of Jesus Christ. I am free to live for Christ!*

Monday

Ephesians 6:12-18

Spend some time mentally putting on the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) and seeing yourself doing it. Take note of how your day goes as you are protected by His armour.

Response: *As I take my stand against the powers and principalities of Satan I praise God that He has equipped me in every way for the battle.*

Declaration: *I walk in victory! I will be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.*

Tuesday

1 Corinthians 15:57

Give thanks to God for the victories He has won for you in your life.

Response: *Thank You Jesus for victory! I will stand firm and let nothing move me. I give myself fully to the work of the Lord because my labor is not in vain.*

Wednesday

1 John 5:1-5

How do these words help you face a situation that you find yourself in today, where there appears to be no way through?

Affirmation. *I am a born-again faith-filled believer – an overcomer – the power of the Cross reveals victory is mine in Christ Jesus.*

Thursday

2 Corinthians 2:14-15

You are in the presence of God – always. What would you change in your life in the light of this verse?

Response: *Lord, may my life-story and testimony be a reflection of Your loving-kindness, right-living, joy and peace that permeates circumstances and places and touches people's lives.*

Friday

Romans 8:28

On Wednesday you thought about a situation in your life where there seemed to be no way through, and the Cross seemed to be the end of the road. In the light of this verse, what 'good' would you like God to bring out of your personal situation?

Response: *Lord as I wrestle with my situation I praise and thank You. I believe You continue to work good out of painful things I am experiencing. I trust You for breakthrough.*

Saturday

John 19:30

Jesus completed His work with a cry of triumph. Spend some time considering that moment, and give thanks.

Response: *Lord, on reflection I realize Your suffering was for my gain. Your redemptive purposes for my life were completed once and for all on that day. I am forever grateful to you.*

Small Group Program:

You are invited this week to attend our Holy Week Services as a Small Group from 13-16 April 2014

The questions about our faith have changed over time. For example, in the 17th century, people asked how they, as sinners, could be reconciled to God. Today we ask how a God of love could permit suffering whether inflicted by another person or caused by natural disasters.

As we look at this question, we need to remember that God is intimately involved in people's suffering. The New Testament affirms that God, as Man, suffered on the Cross – but overcame His suffering. His scars offer hope to people as Jesus' goodness and love enters their own personal suffering. In addition we are reassured that Jesus will help us to endure our pain and to attain a new life once it is past.

Jesus offers us the promise of healing in sickness, and life in death.



The events on the Cross do not glorify suffering but offer change. As we follow Jesus in our own suffering to the Cross and beyond it to resurrection, we are on a journey to a new life ourselves.

Anyone who looks at Jesus hanging on the Cross becomes aware that He can relate to us as we suffer. He has experienced the pain and distress of human suffering. But we also become aware that He has opened the door of life for us.

The scars He carries now shine with a glorified beauty as He reigns with the Father in heaven. Every ugly,

destructive thing that has bound us in the past is now transformed into the same glorious beauty.

God does not inflict suffering upon us. But when He accompanies us through a time of suffering the Cross is His sign to us that He will lead us to new life. He points us to the Cross when we ask Him to justify suffering, for it is there that Christ broke through to pain, shared it with us and opened up the way to the Father's heart. God's love shines out to us from the Cross.

Although Jesus chose to go to the Cross for us, He was also the innocent victim of evil (I Peter 2:22; Isaiah 53:9). He can relate to all who have the same experience. However the New Testament writers focused on the fact that Christ came for sinners, not victims. So as we ask how God could allow suffering to occur we need to remember our even greater need – the need to be liberated from our sins which are the cause of much suffering in the world today, whether we are the instigators or the victims. We are all members of the human race and have the potential to be villain and victim. Each one of us needs the crucified Christ who offers us, through the Cross, comfort and hope when we experience pain, and forgiveness and acceptance when we sin (Isaiah 53:1-12)

'God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6). The New Testament emphasizes that the light and glory that stream from Jesus Christ as He sits at the right hand of the Father have their source in the Cross. Until the resurrection, the glory and light of the Cross is not apparent. Good Friday was a day of darkness but the glory and light of Easter Sunday has its source in the 'glorious man on the shameful cross' (Tom Smail: 'Windows on the Cross').

Jesus prays just before His arrest that God will glorify His name through the coming events. God replies 'I have glorified it and will glorify it again' (John 12:27-28). The Cross reveals the

Father's glory unlike anything else. Paul declares that if the principalities and powers had understood this, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8)!



At the beginning of John's Gospel, John writes 'We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.' At the end of the Gospel, when he writes about the soldier's spear piercing Jesus' side we see the way open up for grace and truth to flow into the world as the blood and the water flowed. Everything that stood between us and God has been removed as we stand at the Cross and reflect God's love for us back to Him.

The glory of the Gospel is that whatever needed to be done for us to be forgiven and accepted by God has already been done once and for all by Jesus on the Cross. It is up to us to stretch out our hands and receive the gifts of forgiveness and acceptance (Ephesians 1:17; 2:8-10). As we are offered and accept these gifts, the hold of sin on our lives is broken and we begin to become the people that God intends us to be.

But the Cross does not only give life – it is also the bringer of death. Paul describes this when he says that in baptism we die to sin and are set free with Christ. Just like crucifixion, this can be painful. Each time we give up one of our sinful ways, change bad habits, or discard wrong attitudes we find a little piece of ourselves dies (Colossians 3:5,8). This is a battle we fight in the company of Jesus who died for it on the Cross and so won the victory over it for us. The glory of the Cross is that it continues to work in this way in our lives on a day to day basis (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). This death brings life (Romans 6:8). Pentecost happened because of Easter. The power that we receive from the Holy Spirit is the power of the Cross and, as we stand before the Cross, Christ breathes life into us and we are filled with the Spirit.

This is His glory – that the power of sin is broken and we are filled with new life in the Holy Spirit through the Cross. It shines out of those who accept it and becomes increasingly evident until ultimately we will sing a new song in the new heaven and earth:

'Worthy is the Lamb that was sacrificed to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory and blessing. To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb be all praise, honour, glory and power for ever and ever' (Revelation 5:12-13).

Family Time

Go to the Sunrise service together as a family before you eat one Easter egg.

Daily Readings

Sunday

Revelation 5:12-13

Spend time on this Easter Sunday praying through this hymn of praise.

Response: You are worthy, Lamb of God who was slain. Worthy to receive all power, riches, wisdom, and strength. All honor, glory, power and praise are due Your Name.

Monday

John 12:27-28

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, blessed be Your Name; blessed be the Name of the Lord; blessed be Your glorious Name.

Response: Lord, may my life be fruitful, bringing glory to Your Name.

Tuesday

1 Corinthians 2:8

Praise God for who He is and what He does.

Response: Lord, Your goodness surrounds me; Your love astounds me. Your infinite grace and abundant provision are so generous. Thank You!

Wednesday

Ephesians 1:17

Who will you pray this prayer for today? Then pray it for yourself too.

Response: Yes Lord! This is my prayer. "Give spiritual wisdom and understanding so that we may all grow together in our knowledge of God the Father." Amen

Thursday

Colossians 3:1-4

Glory awaits you too! Praise God for this amazing gift.

Response: Praise the Lord! I can focus on a life that is hidden with Christ in God. I can live clothed in His righteousness and share in His nature.

Friday

2 Corinthians 4:6

We are given knowledge of the glory of God – worship Him in His glory.

Reflection: I am a precious, treasured earthen vessel empowered by the Holy Spirit to contain and share the light and power of Jesus Christ with others.

Response: Lord let Your light shine so all may see Your glory!

Saturday

Matthew 6:9-13

Pray the Lord's prayer slowly, thinking about each phrase and ending with 'For Thine be the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever; Amen.'

Response: *Lord, be glorified in my life, in my home, in my community, church and nation. Show me Your glory, Lord!*

Session 7

Enjoy a meal together when you celebrate Easter and the gift of the Cross.

At some stage during this time discuss what a difference the Cross has made to your life.



If you have enjoyed this series, you can go into the subject in greater depth by reading Tom Smail's book 'Windows on the Cross', which is available from Amazon

Notes

Bibliography

Smail, Tom

Windows on the Cross, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1995

The Bible

New International Version

Small Group Facilitators

Speak to your own facilitator about helping to facilitate your group.
Contact Mandy or Nadja at 011 463 2333 to start a new group and for
details of the next Training Workshop or visit us at our Small Group
Connect table in the Foyer at the start of every series.

We will welcome you with open arms!

Bryanston Methodist Church Tel: 011-463-2333

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(Booklet Compiled by Mandy Hackland)

