

INTRODUCTION

I shared last Sunday that when we begin a New Year our Elders hope that we will have a growing desire to walk in God's Word. We pray that brothers and sisters will spend more time on reading God's Word and apply it in our daily life. As I plan the sermon schedule for this year I would like for us to go back to some basic doctrines to strengthen our faith. Let me give you a preview of what I plan to cover this year. I give the title "The 4G of Christian Life" for the whole year of messages that I will prepare. Those of you who use cell phone should have heard of the term 4G. It refers to the fourth generation of mobile telecommunication technology. Our sermon series has to do with how to understand our Christian faith and to communicate it with others effectively. The four G's stand for four words that all begin with the letter G - What a Wonderful Grace, What an Amazing Growth, What a Marvelous God and What a Splendid Glory. Unless there is a special occasion I will cover one G in each quarter. This sermon series is for my preaching only. Other speakers, whether they are from our church or other churches, will still speak on whatever topic the Holy Spirit lays on their hearts.

From January to March we will focus on the first G - What a Wonderful Grace. We will examine the wonders of God's salvation grace for us. At first glance, this series of messages may sound like a theology class. Even if that is the case, theology is really not that boring or hard to understand. A pastor once said that theology is learning to become more like God. The Bible is written not only to enrich our knowledge, its teaching has to be applied in our daily life so that we can be more like God. So much for my introduction for the preaching of this year. Our topic for today is: Why the cross? More specifically: why did God choose to use the cross as a way to save us? God is omnipotent. Why did He go through all the hassle of sending Jesus Christ to come to the earth, to become a man and to die on the cross? We will look for answers from three different aspects: historical background, symbolic meaning and spiritual significance.

EXPLANATION

1. 死刑工具 Penalty

The cross is the only way God had established for our salvation. Based on the historical background the cross is an instrument for death penalty. While death sentencing by crucifixion had been used before the Roman times it was the Romans who popularized the method. This punishment would never be used on Roman citizens. It was reserved for slaves and the most notorious non-Roman criminals. The Biblical accounts on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ provide additional information to the historical background to help us understand how the penalty was implemented. In some cases the condemned person would be beaten first. **Matthew 27:26** reads: Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Pilate, the Roman Governor at that time, allowed the soldiers to beat Jesus before He was taken to be crucified. Let us skip down to **verse 30**: They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. Again, Jesus was beaten. The convict would also be forced to carry the cross-beam of the cross to the place of execution. In the case of Jesus, perhaps

He was too weak to carry His own cross after all the assault, the Roman soldiers found a substitute for the task. **Matthew 27:32** says - As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. Crucifixion is not only a means of execution, it also deters people from committing heinous crime. Therefore, it was carried out publicly, much like in the old days when a death-row prisoner was dragged around town before he was executed. Also, the condemned was allowed to die slowly in order to maximize the pain and humiliation. Depending on the severity of the wounds and the health condition of the convict it may take a few hours or even days for him to pass away. The cause of death can be heart failure, shock, dehydration, asphyxiation, or a combination of the above factors. According to the gospel of Mark Jesus breathed His last after being hung on the cross for six hours. In some cases, in order to hasten death the legs of the criminals would be smashed. Ironically, it is a merciful act to reduce the prolonged suffering. When Jesus was nailed to the cross there were two other men crucified on either side of Him. **John 19:31** records: Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The religious leaders did not want the dead bodies to defile the Sabbath. When the soldiers checked on Jesus they realized that He was dead already and so they did not break His legs. Instead, one soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear. **John 19:36-37** read: **36** These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," **37** and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced." The action was to verify that Jesus was already dead. The death of Jesus on the cross was a historical fact. Even most non-Christian historians would attest to that. But some questions remain. Who was this Jesus? Why would this innocent man choose to die in such gruesome way? If His death on the cross is just to demonstrate His great love for the world there are many other ways to show His compassionate heart. How does His death more than 2,000 years ago relate to you and me?

2. 圣经预表 Prophecy

The cross is the only way God had established for our salvation. From a historical perspective the cross is an instrument for death penalty. If we consider the symbolic meaning of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, it is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. It points us back to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Among the different sacrifices there is the sin offering that deals with sins committed unintentionally against God. In Leviticus chapter 4 and the first half of chapter 5 Moses gives us details of how sin offering is to be carried out. Let us read from **Leviticus 4:14-18** to understand how the offering should be presented for the whole Israel community. We will focus on how the blood of the animal would be handled. **14** When they become aware of the sin they committed, the assembly must bring a young bull as a sin offering and present it before the Tent of Meeting. **15** The elders of the community are to lay their hands on the bull's head before the LORD, and the bull shall be slaughtered before the LORD. **16** Then the anointed priest is to take some of the bull's blood into the Tent of Meeting. **17** He shall dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle it before the LORD seven times in front of the curtain. **18** He is to put some of the blood on the horns of the altar that is before the LORD in the Tent of Meeting. The rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. I would like to highlight some symbolic meanings behind the ceremony. The elders of the community laid hands on the bull to be slaughtered. It was as if the sins were transferred to the animal and it suffered death as a penalty on behalf of the sinners. A

priest then sprinkled some blood on the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. You may visualize the curtain like a drape in your home. The pictures on the screen give us some ideas of the layout of the tabernacle and all the accessories. After blood was sprinkled the priest would rub some blood from the same animal on the four horns of the altar. The sprinkling and rubbing of the blood symbolize cleansing power for sins. The instructions in Leviticus 16 for the Day of Atonement help us understand the meaning behind the sprinkling and rubbing of blood. **Verses 18-19** prescribe: ...He shall take some of the bull's blood and some of the goat's blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. **19** He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites. After the offering was presented sins were removed and fellowship with God was restored.

What does all that have to do with Jesus Christ? Jesus is the ultimate sin offering God prepared for us. Animal sacrifice is only a temporary relief for the effect of sin. It is like we use duct tape for some short-term repairs. I found some interesting photos from the internet to illustrate that. In comparison, Jesus is a “permanent fix” to our sin problem. Prophet Isaiah foretold a few hundred years before Jesus came that there would be a perfect sacrifice for our sins. The first half of **Isaiah 53:10** reads: Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering... Jesus Christ is that complete sin offering. He died on the cross once and for all to take away all of our sins. Paul describes the work of Jesus in **Romans 3:25** this way: God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice... Here is something exciting I want to show you. The same Greek word for “sacrifice of atonement” also appears in **Hebrews 9:5** - Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. Here the author is describing the structure of the Ark of the Covenant. In the Greek text this term “atonement cover” (or rendered “mercy seat” in other major translations) is the same word for “sacrifice of atonement” in the Romans passage. You may ask: so what is the big deal? We read earlier in the Leviticus passage that on the Day of Atonement the High Priest would sprinkle animal blood on the altar. The same passage in **16:14** also prescribes that: He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover. Let us draw the correlation here. In the Old Testament sacrificial system the priest sprinkled blood on the atonement cover to remove sins temporarily. Jesus, by shedding His blood on the cross achieved a permanent sacrifice of atonement. The atonement cover is a prototype of the cross. The forgiveness of sins symbolized in the sacrificial system had been fulfilled through Christ. Praise God that Jesus Christ had accomplished the salvation work on the cross. Aren't you thankful that today as we come to worship we no longer have to haul an animal to the sanctuary? Not only that it is cumbersome it is not that hygienic either. We do not need to keep repeating animal sacrifice wondering if our sins have been forgiven. We have an assurance that Jesus Christ has dealt with our sins once and for all on the cross. God's prophecy for the atonement of sin in the Old Testament had been fulfilled.

3. 救贖功效 Potency

The cross is the only way God had established for our salvation. Historically, the cross is an instrument for death penalty. From the Old Testament prophecy, the sacrificial system points to

Jesus Christ, our ultimate sacrifice. The saving grace from the cross has the potency to redeem all those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says in **Romans 3:21-22** that: **21** But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. **22** This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference. God gave the Israelites the Law through Moses to declare His righteous standard. However, no one can obey the Law perfectly. Therefore, everyone is condemned. The Law was established to humble us so that no one can boast that he can reach God's standard by his own effort. Perhaps all of us sitting here can claim ourselves to be noble citizens. We did not break any law of the society. (Or by chance no policeman was around to catch us when we speed!) We are a whole lot better in terms of our moral standard and behavior than the criminals serving in prisons. However, the same God who examines our deeds also sees everything inside of us. The Bible says God knows every word on our tongue even before we utter anything. Who would dare to project every thought in our mind on a big screen and allow other people to watch it? Therefore, by God's standard we are all condemned. Paul continues to say in **Romans 3:23-24** that: **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Paul tells us that we are on the same boat. Whether we get 50 or 80 points we still fall short of God's perfect standard of 100. However, no matter how bad we are all of us can receive salvation through Jesus Christ. The word "justify" in verse 24 is a legal term, meaning declare not guilty. It is not that God cannot prove us guilty. But He chooses to cover our sins with the blood of Christ instead. Then the word "redemption" is a term used in slave trade. A slave can only be set free when he or someone pays a ransom to redeem him. On the cross Jesus Christ paid all of our sin debt. The same word "redeem" also appears in **Galatians 3:13** when Paul says: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." To say that sinners are cursed is another way to understand that we are condemned because of our sins. But this verse tells us that Jesus Christ took away our curse by becoming a curse Himself. On the flip side Christ credited His righteous to all those who put their trust in Him. **1 Peter 2:24** reads: He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. In essence, we exchange our sins for the righteousness of God. Jesus' blood on the cross has the potency to save all who put their trust in Him. Some of us may be trying to do good all our life, hoping that we can be good enough to win God's favor. But as I explained earlier no one can achieve salvation by his own effort. Instead, we all deserve eternal condemnation. It is God who is offended by our sins, but He is merciful enough to provide a way of salvation that we can never achieve nor afford. Jesus died so that we can live. You can be saved by confessing your sins to Jesus Christ and accepting Him into your heart as your Savior and Lord of your life.

CONCLUSION

The cross is the only way God had established for our salvation. Why the cross? Simply put, it is God's wisdom. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 2:7-8** that: **7** No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. **8** None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. All that the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman soldiers knew was that they nailed an innocence man on a cross. No one expected that God chose this unthinkable way to redeem us from sins. Any sinner who has the Son has all the blessings from God. Let me conclude with a

story. A wealthy man and his son liked to collect paintings of various master artists. They spent time together to admire their collection. Soon a war broke out and the son was drafted. He was a courageous fighter. Unfortunately, in one of the battles he sacrificed his own life to save his comrades. Needless to say, the father's heart was crushed. One day, there was a knock on the door. "Sir, you do not know me," said a young man, "I'm one of the soldiers whom you son saved that day. I am forever grateful for his sacrifice." Then the young man presented a package. He explained: "Your son often talked about your love for art. I understand that this gift worth nothing. But I believe you son would like for you to keep it." The father opened the package. It was a portrait of his son painted by the young man. He stared at it with much emotion that tears rowed down his cheeks. After that, the father hung the painting in a prominent place in his home. Every time he had visitors he would show them the portrait before taking them to see his priceless collection. Later, the father also died. An auction was arranged to sell his possessions. Surprisingly, the auctioneer began with the painting of the son. "Who will take this portrait?" asked the auctioneer. There was a moment of silence. Then someone yelled from the back: "We didn't come here for this picture. Let's bid for the masters' works!" The auctioneer ignored the comment: "Who will take the son? 100, 200 dollars?" People started getting impatient. "Skip this one!" said one angry person. Finally a person at the back responded: "I'll take it for \$ 10." It was from the gardener who served the family for a long time. That was what he could afford. "We have \$ 10, who will bid \$ 20?" the auctioneer said. "Give the painting to him. Let's move on to the masterpieces." The crowd was agitated. "Going once, twice, SOLD for \$10!" The auctioneer pounded the gavel. "Now let's see the collection," said a person sitting at the front. The auctioneer laid down his gavel. "I'm sorry, the auction is over." "What about the paintings?" Everyone was dumbfounded. "There is an undisclosed stipulation in the will. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything" More than 2,000 years ago our Heavenly Father sent His beloved Son to die on the cross for us. When Jesus breathed the last He said: "It is finished!" The salvation plan had been completed. Whoever gets the Son gets all the blessings from the Father.