

## The Heart of the Cross



SABBATH—FEBRUARY 26

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY:** Genesis 18:22-33; Romans 3:9-20; Romans 5:12, 15, 18; 2 Corinthians 5:14.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “The message of the cross seems foolish to those [people] who are lost and dying, but it is God’s power to us who are being saved” (1 Corinthians 1:18, NlrV).

**JESUS IS OUR SIN-BEARER, PRIEST, AND REPRESENTATIVE BEFORE GOD.** For this reason, He became a flesh and blood human. Life is in blood. Jesus gave His blood for the life of the world. Jesus was born without any sin. But He came into the world the same way we did. He became involved in the life of humanity,<sup>1</sup> so He could make full payment for our sins.

“Jesus took off His royal robe and His kingly crown to become a human. He became a human so He could be our Substitute.<sup>2</sup> By dying as a human, He might destroy him (Satan) who had the power of death. Jesus could not have died for us as God. But by coming as a human, He could die. He overcame death by dying. Jesus’ death would cause the death of Satan, who had the power of death. Jesus’ death opened the grave for all people who received Him as their personal Savior.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 925, 926.

**A LOOK AT THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** What happened at the Cross? Why did Jesus have to die? How did the story of Abraham and God talking about Sodom symbolize the idea of Jesus becoming our Substitute?

Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 5.

<sup>1</sup>humanity—all the people of the world.

<sup>2</sup>substitute—a person who takes the place of another person. Jesus took our place on the cross.

SUNDAY—FEBRUARY 27

**FOR THE SAKE OF  
 RIGHTEOUS (HOLY) PEOPLE  
 (Genesis 18:22-33).**

The Cross stands at the center of the Christian faith. But from the earliest days through today, the church has debated the answers to such questions as: What happened at the Cross? Why did Jesus die? Did He have to die? What killed Him? What did His death do? Whom did His death help? Paul said he was determined not to know “any thing among you, save [except] Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). But Jesus’ followers have not always agreed on just what “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” means.

**Read Genesis 18:22-33. (If you are not familiar with this story, read all of Genesis 18.) Notice the special relationship between Abraham and God. What principle<sup>3</sup> do these verses show that teaches an important truth about the Cross?**



**“Will You destroy holy people along with the wicked people?”**

<sup>3</sup>principle—general rule that helps people to make a specific rule.

To understand what Genesis 18:22-33 means, it is important to see what Abraham *did not* ask God. He did not ask that the righteous people be spared (saved) instead of the wicked. He did not say, “God, let the righteous people go, but destroy the wicked people.” Instead, Abraham asked God to save Sodom for the 50 righteous people who were there (Genesis 18:24). God answered, “‘If I find 50 godly [holy] people in the city of Sodom, I will save it’” (Genesis 18:26, NIV). All the way through the conversation between Abraham and God, this same idea comes back: God will save Sodom for 45 holy people, 40 people, 30, 20, or 10 holy people.

Genesis 18:22-33 is the Bible’s first clear explanation of the Cross’s theme: Because of a righteous Person (Jesus), wicked people are saved.

**Read again the conversation between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:22-33. Notice how quickly God agreed to the lower numbers of righteous people. What does that tell us about God’s desire to save us?**

MONDAY—FEBRUARY 28

**THE HUMAN CONDITION  
 (Romans 3:9-20).**

Yesterday’s lesson opened up an

important theme: Wicked people are saved for the sake of righteous (holy) people. But in the story of Sodom, there were not enough righteous people to save the city.

In a way, the people of the whole world are the same as the people of Sodom. Maybe our sins are not as terrible as the Sodomites' sins (Genesis 19:5), but our sins are bad enough. Thinking about some of the horrible crimes in this world now, maybe our sins are worse than the sins of Sodom. Also, in a way, the whole world faces the same judgment Sodom faced.



**Sinners are saved because of one righteous Person. That righteous Person is Jesus. Jesus as a human (Matthew 8:34).**

The Bible is clear that every person is a sinner. Every person has broken God's law. No one has the righteousness (holiness) to save himself or herself from God's judgment.

**What was the cause of our sinfulness? Romans 5:12, 15, 18.**

**How is this sinfulness shown? Romans 3:9-20.**

We are sinful because of what we have done. We also are sinful because of what Adam did. We are the children of Adam. When Adam sinned, his nature became sinful. We inherited this sinful nature from him in the same way we inherit character traits<sup>4</sup> from our parents. We were not really in Adam when he sinned. But we have in ourselves the results of his sin. This is why we have inherited sinful natures and are doing sin. It is because of this connection with Adam that we all face the guilt that sin brings.



<sup>4</sup>character traits—the good or bad things about our character. For example, having a bad temper is a bad character trait. Wanting to help people is a good character trait.

**Are your habits and desires toward good or evil, toward God or self? How does your answer support the Bible teaching about our sinful nature?**

## TUESDAY—MARCH 1

### **ONE MAN'S (JESUS') RIGHTEOUSNESS (HOLINESS) (2 Corinthians 5:21).**

**What do these verses say about the character of Jesus?**

John 8:46 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Romans 5:18 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2 Corinthians 5:21 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1 Peter 2:22 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1 John 3:5 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Yesterday we looked at the problem of humanity. That problem is \_\_\_\_\_

sin! But Jesus is different! The Bible teaches that Jesus did not sin. He kept God's law perfectly.

Now let us go back to the principle we looked at Sunday: Guilty people were spared (saved) for the sake of righteous (holy) people. There were no righteous people in Sodom. There are no righteous people in the world today. Jesus was the only righteous Person. God will accept Jesus' righteousness to spare the world. Ten righteous people were needed to save Sodom. But God let one righteous Man save a guilty world. That Man is Jesus. Read John 3:17.

Romans 5:17-19 says that everything Adam had done through sin, Jesus came to remove. Adam brought sin, death, punishment, and disobedience. But Jesus brought righteousness (holiness), life, justification,<sup>5</sup> and obedience. Through Adam, we are all sinners. But through Jesus, we become righteous. Jesus' righteousness was so perfect, so complete, that it was enough to cover the sins of the whole world.

**You are a sinner. You can hide your sin from people. But you cannot hide your sin from God. But no matter how sinful you are, Jesus' righteousness is enough to cover even you. Think about God's righteousness covering your sin!**

<sup>5</sup>justification—the process of being forgiven and made righteous (holy) when we accept Jesus as our Savior.

WEDNESDAY—MARCH 2

**GOD'S JUSTICE (FAIRNESS)  
(Isaiah 23:5).**

So far this week, we have seen that God will spare (save) sinners for the sake of righteous (holy) people. We also have seen that Jesus alone has the righteousness (holiness) to cover the sins of the world. But if Jesus' righteousness were enough to cover the world's sins, why did He have to die?

Part of the answer is found in the story about Sodom. If there had been ten righteous people in Sodom, the city would have escaped destruction. Out of mercy,<sup>6</sup> God would have saved the wicked people in Sodom from the punishment they deserved.

In the same way, we also have seen that Jesus' righteousness alone was enough to spare the whole world from the punishment of sin. This, too, shows God's mercy.

But mercy is only part of the picture. There is another part of the picture we cannot overlook. This part is about how God deals with sin.

**What point do the following verses make about God? Exodus 34:7; Job 8:3; Psalm 89:14; Jeremiah 23:5; Acts 7:52.**

All these texts talk about God's justice. God's justice requires that

sin be punished. It is only fair that sin be punished. So why would God save all the sinful people of Sodom if there are only ten righteous people there? God saving all of Sodom for only ten righteous people would be mercy, but it would not be justice.

In the same way, Jesus' righteousness is enough to cover every sin of every sinner. If all sinners were to go free because of Jesus' righteousness, that would be mercy, but it would not be justice.

**How can God be both merciful<sup>7</sup> and just (fair) with sinners? (Remember that God's justice requires that sin be punished.) Tomorrow's lesson will help answer this question.**

THURSDAY—MARCH 3

**"ONE [JESUS] DIED FOR ALL"  
(2 Corinthians 5:14).**

Today's lesson is about the heart, the mystery, the shame, the justice, and the glory of the Cross.

God wanted to forgive sinful people. But He had to forgive them in a just (fair) way, a way that would not accept sin or leave sin unpunished. There was only one way God could do that. He poured out on Himself—in the person of Jesus—His own righteous (holy) punishment against sin. Because God needs to punish sin, *He punished it in Himself*

<sup>6</sup>mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

<sup>7</sup>merciful—full of mercy.

*through Jesus at the Cross.* That is the heart, the mystery, the shame, the justice, and the glory of the Cross: taking upon Himself the punishment for our sins.

A just God must punish sin. But the good news is that God punished all sin in the person of Jesus, who died in our place. Every person deserved the punishment Jesus went through on the cross. But because of the Cross, no person has to face that punishment.

“One person [Jesus] died for everyone. And so everyone died” (2 Corinthians 5:14, NIV). This verse says that Jesus died as our Substitute. Jesus’ death stands as our death. In that sense, we all died.

God had to punish people for their sins. Or He could take that punishment upon Himself to save people. The Cross shows the choice He made.

“The Cross was an act of punishment and pardon, strictness and grace, justice and mercy.”—Adapted from John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 159.

**How do the following verses show what Jesus has done for us as our Substitute? Isaiah 53:5; Romans 5:8; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:10. Jesus as our Substitute is the center of the plan of salvation.**

FRIDAY—MARCH 4

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** “Our sins

were put on Jesus, punished in Jesus, and put away by Jesus. In this way, Jesus’ righteousness (holiness) can be placed in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Holy Spirit. Sin was charged against Jesus for our sake, but He remained perfectly sinless.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1895.

“Jesus hated sin with a perfect hatred. But He gathered to Him the sins of the whole world. He was not guilty, but He accepted the punishment of guilty people. He was innocent, but He offered Himself as a Substitute for the law-breaker. The guilt of every sin weighed heavily upon the world’s Savior. The evil thoughts, the evil words, the evil actions of every son and daughter of Adam, required punishment upon Himself. This is because He had become the world’s Substitute. The guilt of sin was not His, but His spirit was torn and bruised by the sins of people. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might have the righteousness (holiness) of God through Jesus.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 322.



**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Think about the idea of Jesus dying as our Substitute. What parts of this idea bother you? How fair is it that He suffered the penalty for your sin?
2. Why is the fact that Jesus died as God so important to understanding the Cross?
3. How do the Old Testament sacrifices symbolize the idea of Jesus dying as our Substitute?