The Victory of the Cross

Symbols are powerful. Consider symbols like the swastika, the hammer and sickle, the pentagram, the radiation—all bring to mind strong images and probably strong feelings. The same is true of the cross. In Jesus’ day, the cross was perhaps one of the strongest, most recognizable symbols, calling to mind images of Roman authority, shame, punishment, suffering, and death.

Symbols, however, can change. Did you know the swastika was a common religious symbol for centuries before Hitler’s Germany and can be found in Hindu and Buddhist artwork throughout the world? The Skull and Crossbones symbol was used for centuries to mark cemeteries and can be found commonly on ancient European chapels—only in more recent centuries was this symbol used by pirate ships as a symbol of death and by pharmacists as a symbol of poison.

The cross, the instrument the Romans regularly used to execute its worst criminals, is now the universal symbol of Christianity. That is amazing. No symbol has changed in meaning so dramatically as the symbol of the cross.

Once a symbol of hate, now a symbol of love
Once a symbol of public humiliation, now a symbol of humility and self-sacrifice
Once a symbol of crime and punishment, now a symbol of forgiveness
Once a symbol of non-citizenship and rejection, now a symbol of reconciliation
Once a symbol of suffering and death, now a symbol of healing and life
Once a symbol of doom and defeat, now a symbol of victory

In this study, we will focus on the victory of the cross.

From Defeat to Victory

Before Jesus, the cross was the symbol of defeat, the place where the guilty met their doom—no more mercy, no more appeals, no more life. People did not walk away from the cross. They did not recover from the cross. The cross was a dead end road, and at the end of the road was a grave, yet another symbol of defeat. But Jesus chose the cross, and as a result, it has become a symbol of victory.

So, what do we mean by the cross being a symbol of victory? In what way was victory won at the cross? Let’s focus our study on an enlightening passage in Colossians 2.
Jesus Defeated Sin

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in his cross (Colossians 2:13–15).

The scriptures clearly present our spiritual dilemma: spiritual life depends upon our being without sin, yet we all sin, with the result being spiritual death. Paul says “we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and that, consequently, we were all “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). Further, because of our sin, we were “objects of God’s wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). Paul says here in Colossians 2 that we were all dead our trespasses and that there was a record of debt that stood against us. So, again, our spiritual dilemma is that we need spiritual life, but our sin brings about just the opposite—spiritual death.

The scriptures also clearly present God’s dilemma: he loves us and wants us to have spiritual life, yet we all sin, with the result being spiritual death. God, being perfectly just, demands justice, meaning the guilty must be justly punished; on the other hand, God, being a loving God, desires forgiveness, meaning he wants to release the guilty from punishment. So, again, God’s dilemma is that, as a just God, however much he loves us and wants us to have spiritual life, he cannot overlook sin.

The cross is the answer to our dilemma and God’s dilemma. Jesus, being personally and perfectly innocent, was allowed to take our place and pay the penalty for our sins in our stead and for our benefit. With God’s demand for justice satisfied (i.e., the penalty for our guilt was paid and God’s wrath was poured out on sin), he was then in a position to offer forgiveness to us.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith… This was to show God’s righteousness [i.e., justice] at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:23–26).

Jesus’ death was the greatest of injustices—the absolutely innocent paying the price for the absolutely guilty.
Jesus Defeated the Law

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in his cross (Colossians 2:13–15).

Paul says that Jesus canceled the record of debt that stood against us “with its legal demands.” Other translations say, “expressed in ordinances,” or “expressed in decrees.” Sin is a violation of law, so the reason we had a sin problem is because the law was against us. In a nutshell, before Jesus, the only way anyone could have spiritual life was to be sinless, and that meant keep the law perfectly. Even in a fell swoop, if God were to forgive the sins of the world, it would be only a matter of a short time before every individual would violate the law again and be relegated one again to the spiritual graveyard. You see, it was not just that our sin was against us, but the whole idea of spiritual life being dependent upon law-keeping was against us. We needed a new system of justification.

Jesus not only lived a sinless life and paid the penalty for our sin, but his atoning sacrifice is an effective sacrifice for all ages, and God deemed that all who would put their faith in his Son would receive the blessing of forgiveness.

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Justification is no longer by law-keeping, but by faith in the one who kept the law, yet willingly paid the penalty for the law-breakers. Further, those who continue to live under the lordship of Jesus receive the ongoing benefit of forgiveness.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:6–7).

Jesus Defeated Satan

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set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in his cross (Colossians 2:13–15).

Revelation 12 tells of this great battle between the host of heaven and Satan and his angels. Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

While there are a number of symbols involved in this passage, the gist of the vision is as follows. There is a Dragon—Satan—that swept from heaven a significant portion of its population. Many angels believed in Satan’s power and the seeming benefits of being a part of his kingdom.

There is a woman preparing to give birth to a child. The woman represents God’s people and the child is a picture of Jesus. The Dragon, Satan, recognizes the child (Jesus) and is prepared to destroy him as soon as he is born. But he was unable to destroy Jesus, who eventually, after completing his mission, returned to heaven very much alive.

John says the next thing that happened was a war in heaven: the Dragon (Satan) and his angels fought against Michael and his angels. Satan lost the battle, and the result was that he and his angels were cast from heaven. In the cross event, Jesus triumphed over the Enemy, and in Jesus we triumph over him, also.

**Jesus Defeated Death**

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil (Hebrews 2:14).

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54–57).

In Jesus, we are more than conquerors!
Closing

The cross is the ultimate in iconic irony. Imagine choosing an electric chair or hangman’s noose or a guillotine as a symbol for your organization. Jesus chose the ultimate symbol of suffering and death and defeat, and he turned it into the ultimate symbol of healing and life and victory. Amazingly, Jesus chose the cross, and the world has never been the same.

The cross has become the most widely recognized symbol in the world. It marks more graves, graces more jewelry, and sits atop more churches than any other design. The making of the sign of the cross is known from basilicas to baseball diamonds. Finding a logo has become big business, but no corporation, country, or cause has produced such an enduring or widespread image (Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?*, p. 173).