

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Jesus and the Cross 3: Why is the cross a victory?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: N.B. there is more content than usual in this session, and it covers what might be challenging material, so it might be worth considering spreading it over two sessions.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why is there evil in the world?

Understanding the information (30 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

The Bible teaches how God wants to do much more than rescue individual people. There is a bigger task to be done. We have seen how in the Old Testament priests would sprinkle blood over the “land” to symbolise how God needed to cleanse the world from the polluting effects of people’s sin. There is no doubt that the origin of much of the pain caused in the world stems from the decisions of human beings, and the harm we do to ourselves, one another and the planet.



But importantly the Bible consistently describes how there is also a polluting reality to evil which is bigger than, and has a wider impact than, the actions of human beings. Right from the beginning to the end of the Bible the battle between good and evil exists not only in human beings, but also between spiritual forces. In the first three chapters of the Bible a serpent (Genesis 3:1) representing evil, seeks to influence humans with a lie (Genesis 3:1) and a cherubim (angel) is placed in the garden. (Genesis 3:24) to guard it. Evil is shown to have a bigger source and impact than human beings.

Yet crucially, the first hint we get in the Bible that a ‘Messiah’ would come to defeat it is also right back at the beginning of the story. God promises the ‘snake’ that a human being would come who will “crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15) This is the first promise of the way in which God will deal with spiritual forces of evil decisively.

We might expect that earlier “primitive” books of the Bible would describe such things. So how much did Jesus and His followers see His mission as being the one who would finally crush evil in this way?

In the gospels, the final defeat of evil is at the centre of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Both Jesus and New Testament writers continue with the Bible’s story of the cosmic battle between good and evil. Jesus names satan the “prince of this world” (John 12:31) a term which meant ‘the highest official in a city or a region in the Greco-Roman world’. While God is the ultimate Lord, satan has functional power. Luke portrays satan as possessing “all the kingdoms of the world” believing he can give authority to rule these kingdoms to anyone he pleases, even to Jesus. (Luke 4:5-6) Jesus has come to expel the “thief” who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10) John is even clearer: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” (1 John 3:8)

With this background perspective of cosmic conflict throughout the Bible and in Jesus’ ministry, we can see the cross not just as the way God reconciles people to Himself, but as a cosmic victory through which God finally defeats His enemies. This is known as “Christus Victor” – the victorious Messiah.

By dying and rising from the dead, Jesus was enthroned as the King who freed the whole universe from its slavery to an evil ruler and the power of death. In this victory is included the salvation of people – He is Saviour and Lord. In John as Jesus speaks of His coming death He says, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” (John 12:31) In Luke, as the end draws near “Satan entered Judas” to prompt him to betray Jesus. (Luke 22:3) At His arrest Jesus tells the soldiers, “This is your hour – when darkness reigns.”(Luke 22: 53) It is as if all evil is being lured to the cross.

Yet the accounts of Jesus’ death make it quite clear that his execution is in fact the beginning of His being lifted up to become the divine king - on a wooden throne, making a ‘royal announcement’ that God’s purpose is to rescue his world by dying for it, allowing sin, evil and death to overwhelm Him. No one can fully describe exactly how this victory is achieved, but the evidence for it arrives three days later.

The only way anyone can rise from the dead is if evil and death have been dealt with. Jesus’ resurrection is the proof that death, sin and evil are overcome and that He is Lord: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15: 55-56) Just as the assassination of Martin Luther King seemed like a defeat, but resulted in a movement for peace, so Jesus’ apparent defeat overcomes evil.

As a result the power of death is broken. The full meaning of the ransom (‘price of release’) paid on the cross was that in Christ God had paid to rescue His creation (including human beings) from slavery to the powers. “By his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death.” (Hebrews 2:14) As Eastern Orthodox Christians (who emphasise Christus Victor) say repeatedly every Easter midnight service, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs he has given life.”

Evil can no longer have the final word, and we can be who God calls us to be. Being saved is more than individual forgiveness – it is about being “set free from this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4) and liberated from a time when “we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.” We have been “rescued...from the power of darkness and transferred...into the kingdom of his beloved Son.”(Colossians 1: 12-13)

This affects all of creation. The suffering of the whole of creation, which is itself somehow in “slavery” due to this cosmic battle (the letter to the Romans says the “whole creation is groaning” in its “bondage to decay”), is dealt with through cross and resurrection. So salvation is the liberation of the whole world process of which I am only a small part.

Thomas’ response to seeing the risen Christ was to fall down and say, “My Lord and my God.” Sherry Weddell writes that knowing about the “life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...leads a person to be able to say Jesus is Lord.” A strong image Paul uses demonstrates the completeness of Jesus’ victory. He describes Jesus as a conquering ruler, bringing His defeated enemies in a humiliating procession behind Him: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Colossians 2:15)

Discuss: The “Christus Victor” understanding of what Jesus did on the cross was the most significant for early Christians. Why do you think this is?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Colossians 2: 13-15 which describes the victory over the powers of evil.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?

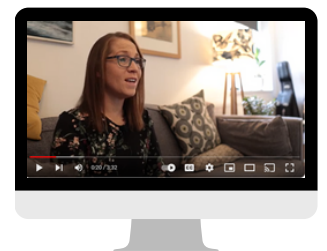


Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

https://youtu.be/QKe_XPKZO18

What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

The most common statement early Christians made to describe discipleship was that “Jesus is Lord”. Today these three words are the motto for the World Council of Churches. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was executed by the Nazis for resisting Hitler said that to celebrate Jesus as “personal Saviour” but not as Lord is “Christless Christianity”. Paul writes that one day every knee will bow “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:11)

To declare someone is Lord is to say they have power and authority over your life. Yet to say they are Lord without doing what they say is a self-contradiction. This is why Jesus asked, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things that I say?” (Luke 6:46) For many Christians today, and for early Christians under Roman rule, to say “Jesus is Lord” a pledge of allegiance which puts their lives on the line. Roman citizens had to say, “Caesar is Lord”. Lots of Christians lost their lives because they refused to do so – after the resurrection there was only one Lord they could submit to.

Fascinatingly, Rome had a tradition that whomever an eagle settled on would be the emperor- so when early Christians read about a dove descending on Jesus at His baptism one thing they would have realised is that this was God’s choice to be king – though with a dove-like power totally the opposite of the emperor’s.

In this context Christians saw their baptism as an oath (the original meaning of sacrament) to serve the Lord and forsake all other false rulers. (A Roman soldier would pledge a sacramentum to serve Caesar). Rather than serving the empire’s kingdom, they were serving God’s. To be baptised and say Jesus is Lord was a complete change of priorities. If Jesus is our Saviour we seek to become like Him because He is the one “who loved me and gave himself for me.” If He is Lord we place Him at the centre of our priorities because He deserves nothing less.

Paul longed for us to be “mature in Christ” and that “Christ would be formed in us”. Does this mean disciples are made perfect by Jesus’ victory, or can expect to be able to achieve perfection? It is clear that we live in a time when, while the power of evil (or the “sting of death”) has been defeated, **the effects of it remain** – throughout the world, and in our own lives. We await the day when God’s plan will be completed. Because He is love, God does not force obedience on anyone, even when we submit to Him – we still have the ability to choose.

This amazing view of human responsibility reflects three senses of what it means to be made whole (or saved). The nineteenth century scholar, Bishop Westcott was once asked, “Are you saved?” The Bishop replied, “Do you mean that I have been saved, or I am being saved, or that I will be saved?” The biblical picture is that through the cross we have been saved from the **result** of sin. As we grow as disciples, submitting to God’s work in us, we can be set free from the **power** of sin. But we are still waiting for the time when the world, and everyone in it, will be set free from the **presence** of sin. As we grow in becoming like Christ, our expectation is that while we cannot be perfect while sin remains present in the world, we will be being transformed into His image.

As John Newton put it, “I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.”

Discuss: What difference does it make to you that Jesus is Lord?

Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Up from the grave He arose
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes
He arose a Victor from the dark domain
And He lives forever with His saints to reign
He arose! (He arose)
He arose! (He arose)
Hallelujah! Christ arose!



Vainly they watch His bed
Jesus, my Saviour!
Vainly they seal the dead
Jesus my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes
He arose a Victor from the dark domain
And He lives forever with His saints to reign
He arose! (He arose)
He arose! (He arose)
Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Death cannot keep his prey
Jesus, my Saviour!
He tore the bars away
Jesus my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose
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Robert Lowry



Jesus and the Cross 3: Why is the cross a victory?

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Additional notes:

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