

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever seen the Izod Lacoste logo that looks like a little alligator? You've probably worn something with the alligator logo—but do you know the true meaning behind the alligator? First, it's really not an alligator—it's a crocodile. In the 1920s the world's leading tennis player was the Frenchman Rene Lacoste. He won Wimbledon, the French Open and the U.S. Open multiple times and had been given the nickname "Le Crocodile." Some say he got that nickname because of his ferocious tenacity on the court—while others say he got it from having such a large nose!

At the time, tennis players were still wearing stiff, long sleeved shirts with ties. But when Lacoste played in the 1926 U.S. Open, he wore a shirt of his own creation—a white, short-sleeved cotton shirt with a small crocodile embroidered on the chest. It started a fashion revolution and by 1933 Lacoste was mass producing cotton shirts with the little crocodile. It was the first time a logo appeared on the outside of a garment. Now it's quite possible you have personally sported the crocodile on something you've worn without knowing about or even caring about the true meaning of the crocodile symbol.

The same is true of the cross. We see crosses everywhere. There are thousands of crosses on the graves of soldiers. For millions, the cross is just a symbol for a relief organization like the Red Cross. For others, the cross is simply a fashion accessory. People wear them around their necks. The rock singer Madonna prefers to wear large cross necklaces and earrings, although she isn't a Christian. In tattoo art, crosses have always been one of the most popular designs. But like the crocodile on the shirt, millions of people are displaying or wearing a cross—but they are totally clueless about the meaning of the cross.

The great Christian writer Oswald Chambers observed: "All heaven is interested in the cross of Christ, all hell is terribly afraid of it, while men are the only beings who more or less ignore its meaning." Having a cross on your grave doesn't make you a Christian any more than having flowers on your grave makes you a florist. Wearing a cross around your neck doesn't make you a Christian any more than wearing dog tags around your neck makes you a dog. I'm not saying don't wear a cross—just be certain you know the meaning behind the symbol you display.

That's what this message is all about—the meaning of the cross. Let's read the text beginning in I Peter 2:20:

But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 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. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

As we consider the cross, there are four different crushing thoughts I want to share with you.

1. ON THE CROSS, JESUS WAS CRUSHED BY THE PAIN HE ENDURED

Peter is referring to the physical suffering of Jesus when he wrote in verse 21: "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example."

Many of you have seen the movie, "The Passion of the Christ." It is a gut-wrenching experience to watch the graphic torture Jesus endured. For that reason, I'm not going to say much about His physical pain at this time. Mel Gibson was criticized by some who said the movie should have focused more on the life and teaching of Jesus than on the suffering and death of Jesus. But the Bible doesn't say, "By His teaching you have been healed." It doesn't say, "By His lifestyle you have been healed." It says, "By his wounds, you have been healed." Even though I'm not going to recount the gory details of His torture and crucifixion, it is important for you to realize these sufferings of Jesus were necessary.

The movie revived the old question, "Who crucified Jesus?" Some say the Jews crucified Jesus. After all, they handed Him over to Pilate and demanded He be crucified. Some insist the Romans were responsible. They were the ones who actually drove the nails into His hands and feet. As we'll discuss later, in a sense, each of us crucified Jesus. In the movie, the hand used to hammer the spikes into Jesus' hands is that of Mel Gibson. So who crucified Him? Did the Jews? Did the Romans? Did we? I've got another answer for you that may surprise you: God crucified Jesus. The Bible says: "It was the Lord's will to CRUSH and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a sin offering...after the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life." (Isaiah 53:10-11)

In his famous painting, Pieter Rubens portrays Jesus as it becomes dark at midday. Jesus is looking up to heaven as if you can hear Him saying, "My God, my God, why have YOU forsaken me?" It's as if Jesus is saying, "Father, this pain is crushing me! Why?" I love the words to the song that answers that question: "I'm forgiven, because you were forsaken. I'm accepted, you were condemned. I'm alive and well your spirit lives within me; because you died and rose again." If someone asks you the question, "Who killed Jesus?" just tell them, "Nobody. He's not dead, He's alive!"

2. ON THE CROSS, JESUS WAS CRUSHED BY THE BURDEN OF OUR SIN

One of the most powerful statements in the Bible is verse 24: "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." Say that first phrase again, and this time, use the word "my" instead of "our." "He himself bore MY sins in his body on the tree." The word "bore" means to be crushed under a heavy burden. As Jesus was hanging on the cross, there was visible suffering and there was invisible suffering. The visible sufferings could be seen by the blood drenching His forehead from the crown of thorns, and the blood dripping onto the dirt from His hands and feet. But the invisible sufferings included the guilt, agony, and shame of billions of sins being laid on His body. That's what really crushed Him.

Dr. F.B. Meyer has written: "It was not the anticipation of approaching physical torture which bowed Him so low in Gethsemane, or pressed the bloody sweat from Him...it was the foreboding of the pressure of our sins, which already began to crush his heart, and which broke it on the cross." (*Tried by Fire*, p. 107-108)

Imagine the shock to His entire system—a sinless, holy man being defiled with the humiliation of every murder, rape, robbery, and lie every committed. It was the foul rottenness polluting His pure personality that killed Him—not the nails. Have you ever seen the significance in the fact that Jesus only survived the cross for six hours? It was common for crucified men to linger for many days before they died. The two criminals crucified with Jesus had their knees broken so they would die, but Jesus was already dead. If you were filling out a death certificate for Jesus and it asked for the cause of death, don't write "crucifixion." Don't write "Roman Execution." The true cause of death was carrying our sins. The strain of carrying that load overwhelmed His entire system and that's what killed him.

The Bible says: "But He was pierced for our transgressions, he was CRUSHED for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5)

When Jesus was suffering, He was taking our place—He became our substitute. Phillip Keller writes about a woman in California who stood before a judge. When the charge was read, she pleaded guilty. The judge accepted her verdict and she was ordered to either pay \$500 or spend 20 days in jail. The young woman responded that she didn't have the money for the fine, so she would accept the jail time. Slowly, the judge rose and removed his robe. He walked down and stood beside the young woman. She was his daughter. Then, with a heavy heart, he took his check book and paid the \$500 fine to the clerk. Her judge was also a loving father. He paid the debt she couldn't pay. As we stand before the Judge of the Universe, we have to plead guilty. We cannot pay the fine. But the judge is also our Savior—He has already borne the punishment for us! Our sins crushed Him on the cross.

3. ON THE CROSS, JESUS CRUSHED THE POWER OF SATAN

You may recall during the opening scene of "The Passion of the Christ," Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane as Satan watches. Suddenly a hideous snake is seen slithering toward Jesus. After Jesus rises from His prayer, He stomps on the head of the snake. I've had people ask me, "What's up with the snake?" That scene is based upon a fulfillment of the very first prophecy about Jesus found in the Bible.

In the first chapters of Genesis Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden. Lucifer came slithering along to tempt Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. She did and she got Adam to do the same. As soon as they disobeyed God, they experienced shame and guilt for the first time. They realized they were naked so they tried to cover their guilt with leaves—but those leaves couldn't cover their sense of shame before God.

In Genesis 3:14-15 God pronounced His judgment upon the serpent: "The Lord God said to the serpent (Satan), 'Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all livestock and all the wild

animals!...I will put enmity (hostility) between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will CRUSH your head, and you will strike his heel.” That was a prophecy about Jesus. From the beginning, the devil’s offspring (his followers) have demonstrated hostility toward the descendants of Eve. Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, Satan, the serpent, was there striking at the heel of Jesus. As soon as Jesus was born, the serpent put into the mind of Herod the Great to kill all the boy babies born in Bethlehem. Satan tried to disable Jesus when he tempted Him in the wilderness.

During the trial and torture of Jesus, Satan was like a cornered asp striking again and again as Jesus was beaten and wounded. And as Jesus died, Satan must have hissed with glee.

But as Jesus died on the cross, He was fulfilling the prophecy God delivered thousands of years earlier. He crushed the head of the serpent.

And then as Jesus rose from the dead, He stomped again. Since that time, the devil has been a defeated foe. The Bible says in Hebrews 2:14: “He (Jesus) shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.”

In his book, *Victory over the Devil*, Jack Taylor wrote: “Satan’s defeat did not remove him from the picture. He is still very much with us. His past defeat assures Christ present domination over him. He is vanquished, but not vanished; present but not prevailing; active but not able to overcome us. Satan is being crushed in the battlefields of this world where believers have learned the truth about their enemy being a defeated foe.” (p. 91)

I grew up around snakes in L.A. (Lower Alabama). My dad was a forester and when I was a kid I often walked through the woods with him as he “cruised timber.” That’s the term used for walking through a tract of forest and estimating the value of the timber. When you cruise timber you can’t follow a trail because you have to walk in a straight line using a compass. Because we had to walk through swamps and thick underbrush, we usually saw plenty of snakes. My dad carried a pistol, but the snakes usually heard us coming and we only saw them as they slid away into the underbrush.

One day he was walking along in front of me and as he stepped over a log he stopped suddenly and said, “Whoa!” He had stepped right onto the body of a large rattlesnake that had been hidden beside the log. I was behind him and although I couldn’t see the snake, I could hear the distinctive sound of the rattlers as they vibrated. Fortunately, he had stepped close enough to the head that the snake couldn’t strike him and he had enough presence of mind not to pick up his foot. He told me to stand back and he pulled out his pistol and “Blam!” with one shot he blew the snake’s head off. He admitted later his heart was beating pretty fast and he was lucky he hadn’t shot his own foot!

It was the largest rattler I’d ever seen—as a boy, it seemed to me it was nine or ten feet long, but it was probably only about four feet. A rattlesnake skin was a nice souvenir and my dad had some friends who loved to eat rattlesnake, so he asked me to carry the snake until we got back to the truck. Now, I knew it was dead—it didn’t have a head, but I was still afraid to touch it. So I took a stick and picked it up. Suddenly the rattlers started shaking and I screamed and threw the snake

up in the air. My dad laughed because the movement of the rattlers was just a reflex. He kept telling me the snake was dead and it couldn't hurt me. So, I got my stick and picked it up again. On the way back to the truck, the rattle sounded a couple of more times and each time I screamed and dropped the snake. My dad kept saying, "There's nothing to be afraid of—that old snake is dead. He can't hurt you." I wanted to say, "Well why don't YOU carry it then?"

The same thing is true of that old serpent Satan. His power was destroyed on the cross, but he's still making a lot of noise and scaring a lot of people. Too many of us are screaming and jumping around in fear while our Heavenly Father is saying, "Do not be afraid! Satan can't hurt you." He's still making trouble, but he is a defeated foe because on the cross, Jesus crushed the head of Satan. There's a great verse in Romans 16:20. It says, "The God peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." Because Satan was stomped by the Savior, he is powerless. But one day soon, the redeemed church will participate in Satan's final crushing.

I love the words Martin Luther wrote about Satan in his hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." "...The Prince of Darkness grim; we tremble not at him; His rage we can endure; for, lo, his doom is sure; One little word shall fell him." Amen!

4. ON THE CROSS, JESUS CRUSHED OUR REBELLION AGAINST GOD

In verse 25 Peter writes: "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." It is our natural tendency to wander away from God because each of us has the heart of a spiritual rebel.

Since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, mankind has been involved in an uprising—a rebellion against God. The Bible says in Adam, all men sinned—and all men died. Man's wickedness can be seen in the Tower of Babel when we thought we could build a tower and by the work of our own hands gain heaven. It was seen in the wickedness of the people who lived in Noah's time who performed every evil imaginable. This wickedness still exists in our world today, as evidenced by the slaughter of millions of Jews during the Holocaust or the murder of thousands of Sudanese Christians in Africa. But on the cross, once for all, Jesus crushed the rebellion. He made a way for rebellious sinners to be forgiven.

There was a strange man in the Old Testament named Balaam—God used a donkey to talk to him. But Balaam was a prophet and God spoke truth through him even though he wasn't a Jew. In an amazing prophecy about Jesus, Balaam said: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will CRUSH (through) the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth (noisy boasters)." (Numbers 24:17) One of the reasons the wise men followed a star looking for the King of the Jews was because they read this prophecy. They looked for a star—found it, and they anticipated a king—a king holds a scepter. But Balaam predicted this King would crush through the foreheads of Moab. Moab was the son of Lot and one of his daughters—the result of incest. He is a type of wickedness. There is no record of anyone named Sheth, but the Hebrew word means "noisy boasters." This is a remarkable prophecy that Jesus would crush the rebellious minds of wicked and boastful men. He would call back the enemies of God.

Who are the enemies of God? We were. "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." (Colossians 1:21)

There's an easy way to visualize God's plan of salvation using your own two hands. It involves four turns. First, place your hands out with the palms facing each other as if you were about to clap. Your left hand represents God and your right hand represents mankind. When God first created mankind, they were in harmony with each other. But man rejected God's love and chose to sin—turn your right hand away. Now turn your left hand away—that's a picture of a holy God who has to judge sin—so He cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden. The human problem is that because we are sinners, and God is holy, we don't have ability to relate to Him. But here's the good news—turn your left inward. This represents God making the first move to restore our ability to know Him. On the cross, Jesus fully paid the sin debt and at that moment, God demonstrated His love for us. The right hand is still facing away, but God is now seeking and inviting you to be reconciled with Him—that's grace. He says, "Come home to Me. Won't you come home?" And when we accept His offer of forgiveness and eternal life—turn your right hand inward until the palms are touching—that's when we can once again live in harmony with the God who loves us.

CONCLUSION

We've been talking about the crush of the cross. As I've been speaking, have you thought about another use of the word "crush?" I'm not talking about an orange crush, either. Do you remember when you were young and you first started noticing people of the opposite sex? When I was in the third grade, I hated girls. We only had one television, of course, so whenever a kissing scene came on, I was so uncomfortable, I'd close my eyes and say "Yuck!" But I recall looking at Sandra Moody one day and thinking, "When I stop hating girls, she is going to be the first one I stop hating!"

Then in the fourth grade Sammie Pittman came to me and said, "Sandra Moody has a crush on you." I didn't exactly know what a crush was at the time, but I sure liked the sound of it! It made my heart beat faster and sweat broke out on my forehead. She had a crush on me! So she became my girlfriend—that didn't mean anything much more than sending notes to each other that said, "I like you, do you like me? Check yes or no." I did finally work up enough nerve to hold her hand in the seventh grade. There is something thrilling about a first love. In a way, God is our first love. In Revelation 2:4, Jesus was addressing a problem of coldness and apathy in the church at Ephesus and He said, "You have forsaken your first love." (Revelation 2:4)

The cross of Jesus is proof positive the God of the Universe has a crush on you. He is your first love because nobody loved you before He did. Ephesians 1:4 says, "Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love." (*The Message*)

God has a crush on you. He loves you greater than anybody can every love you. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

(Romans 5:8) He has a crush on you and it ought to make your heart beat faster and sweat to break out on your forehead.

What do you see in the crush of the cross? You see the love of God. He is calling you Himself today. He wants to be your Shepherd. He will lead you and feed you. He'll protect you and guide you. He wants to be the Overseer of your soul. He says, "Come to me all you who are weary and tired, and I'll give you rest."

OUTLINE

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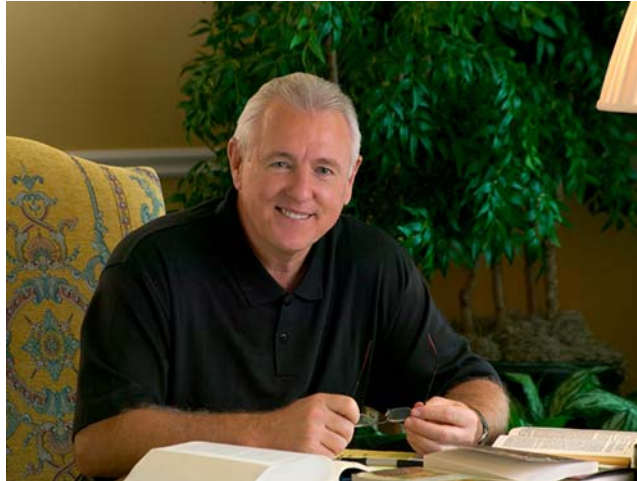
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes