

Most Christians have thought about the cross many times. We often approach the scene as one who kneels at the foot of the cross, occasionally daring to look up at our crucified Messiah. It is good that we do this from time to time, to remember the great cost of our salvation.

But what if we could view the cross more from God's perspective? What if we tried to see more of the big picture, and what was going on that was not immediately visible, and what the Father was doing? Admittedly, we can only know so much about what God was thinking and doing at the time. But the closer we can get to God's point of view, the deeper will be our understanding of His heart in all of this.

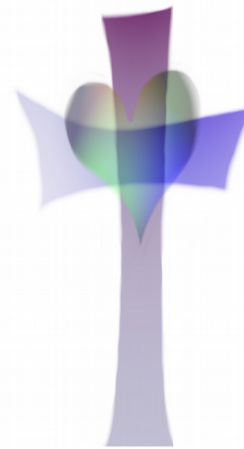
So what did the cross mean to God? What was going on in His mind as He planned for this eons before the creation itself? And why did He take such a radical approach to rescuing humanity?

Some of the clues to these questions can be found in the writings of the apostle Paul in which he refers a number of times to the *mystery* surrounding the gospel. Now 'mystery' can have several meanings, and today is often used to refer to some of the more incomprehensible parts of our faith – those things we cannot quite understand, like the *Trinity*. But Paul uses the term somewhat differently. What Paul means by 'mystery' are those elements of the gospel that had been hidden throughout the ages and had only recently been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although the Jewish prophets had foreseen a New Covenant with new features, they had very little idea of how those things would play out in the real world. God said He would write His laws on the hearts of the people. But how would that happen? What form would that take?

One of the things we discover as we study these passages closely is that God is really good at keeping secrets. Apparently, not even the hosts of heaven or Satan himself knew what was coming. Look at how Paul describes his ministry to the Ephesians: “It was given to me to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realm” (Eph.3:9-10). We see this theme also in Matthew when he quotes an ancient prophecy about Jesus: “I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.” When we look closely, it becomes evident that beginning with the birth of Jesus and culminating in the ministry of Paul, there were a number of secrets which God revealed for the very first time. And up until then, God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were the only ones who knew what would happen at the cross.

So what was God up to, that no one else knew about? To find out, let us take up those passages where Paul describes these mysteries, and allow him to pull back the curtain to see the wisdom and love of God that was so completely embedded in the atonement.

Much of Paul's use of the word *mystery* occurs in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. At times he speaks in fairly general terms about “the mystery of the gospel” (Eph.6:19) without adding much explanation, as if his readers already understood what he meant. Thankfully for our clarification, he gets quite a bit more specific elsewhere. For example, Paul tells us that his primary work of ministry revolved around one of the biggest bombshells no one saw coming.



“The mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph.3:4-6).

The idea that Gentiles would become part of the larger “people of God” had never been fully accepted by the Jewish teachers of the time. Their perception of how Gentiles might be included in the future kingdom was more like this: Israel would be in charge of the whole earth, and they would lead everyone else back to the Law of God. It would be somewhat of a one-up-one-down relationship, in recognition of their special status as the custodians of the Law through the centuries. No way did they ever envision any kind of family relationship with those who were not direct descendants of Abraham.

We see evidence of this point of view even in the early church, which initially was almost entirely Jewish. When Peter preached to Cornelius and his entire household received the Holy Spirit, everyone was shocked. It was only by revelation that Peter understood how God could call these people *clean*. At one point, Paul had to defend his ministry to the leadership in Jerusalem, because they were still unsure how anyone could be saved who had not first become a Jewish believer. The idea that God would fully welcome Gentiles into the New Covenant had been hidden from just about everyone.

Another secret the Father had been keeping had to do with a very fundamental change in the nature of God's presence in the world. Paul gives us a glimpse of this mystery in his letter to the Colossians.

“So that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col.1:25-27).

One of the central themes in the Old Covenant was that God was present with His people by residing in the Holy of Holies in the heart of the Temple. It was the one place in the universe where heaven and earth touched and the boundaries between them became permeable. That was why only Jews had access to God. But with the New Covenant, God begins to indwell each individual believer. Christians all become 'temples' of God (1Cor.6:19). This was one of the great secret mysteries – that God would inhabit each one of us, and the boundaries between heaven and earth would become permeable within our very bodies! What a glorious revelation! Christ in you! No one saw that coming.

Still another surprise came in the form of how people would actually be transformed. Paul gives us this picture near the end of Romans: “this mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested ... leading to obedience of faith.” Something about this New Covenant would make possible a kind of obedience which had never been fully realized under the Old Covenant. Over and over we see the problems which were never resolved by the Law. It was never enough to lay down the basic standards of holiness. People simply lacked the internal resources to live the way God intended for them. Paul tells us that the Law unmasked the power of evil and demonstrated irrefutably our need for a savior. So under the New Covenant God planned to write His laws on the hearts and minds of people instead. That much was well-known. But exactly how that would happen and what form it would take was still a mystery. What Paul came to understand was that faith and trust in God would become the means by which the

righteousness of God would be released into people's lives. "What the law could not do ... God did" (Rom.8). And again, "Christ is the end of the law for everyone who believes" (Rom.10). No one would have ever guessed that faith and grace would supersede the Law of Moses. And the enemy was sure that as long as the Law was in effect, he would retain the upper hand because the Law condemned everyone.

But there's more!

In his letter to the Colossians (2:2), Paul identifies one of the most shocking revelations in all of history – "God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself!" Every observant Jew knew about the Messiah and was waiting for his coming. But no one ever thought Messiah would be an incarnation of God Himself. It was unthinkable! Or worse! There are good reasons why the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy. God in human flesh was an intolerable thought. It made a person equal with God, and they could not tolerate that thought. No way did they see that coming. And until the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, it is unlikely that such a thought ever occurred to the enemy either. So when Jesus began His ministry, Satan made it His goal to arouse the Jewish leaders and put an end to whatever it was that Jesus was up to. He had no idea what would happen after that.

But it gets even better! One of the greatest insights Paul had regarding the atonement was that it overturned the kingdom of evil, and as a result Jesus took back possession of the planet.

When you were dead in your transgressions, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Col.2:13-15; see also 1Pet.3:22)

First, that the Law would be removed – along with its condemnation of humanity – was never anticipated by anyone. It was, in fact, unthinkable. Second, it turns out that the death and resurrection of Jesus was not at all what it appeared to be. From a purely human perspective, the crucifixion looked like a total defeat. The disciples scattered. Thomas was shattered. Peter went back to fishing. Jesus' followers were all terrified and defeated. Their much anticipated overthrow of the Romans had been turned upside down. Yet here is Paul, saying that it was the greatest coup ever! Although he does not give us the details of exactly how the cross accomplished such a monumental task (in this particular passage), Paul is clear about the power of the cross to destroy the kingdom of darkness. No one saw that coming.

Most of all, it was Satan himself who was utterly shocked to discover that his greatest "triumph" of crucifying Jesus turned out to be his complete undoing. Back when he first tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Satan had dangled "all the kingdoms of the world" in front of Jesus and offered them in exchange for worship. He could only make that offer because he was certain he had clear title to the Gentile world, and had even made a fairly good mess of the Jewish world as well. But suddenly everything was turned on its head, and his primary rights to humanity were stripped away. Because once sin and death were off the table and God could have an intimate relationship with His people, Satan could no longer claim exclusive ownership of the planet. The Kingdom of God had come, and with it came the power to transform lives and overcome all that was evil.

So when we step back and look at the collective impact of the cross, the secrets that God was keeping were unbelievably incredible and far reaching!

- Messiah would be a Person of the Trinity
- Faith in Messiah would bring about transformation of character
- The enemy's kingdom would be overthrown
- Jesus would become the new King
- God would inhabit His people
- Gentiles would be included

When we look at how devastating this colossal turn of events was to the enemy, we begin to see why God had to keep it all hidden. Paul gives us the quintessential reason:

But we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1Cor.2:7-8).

Paul is not talking about Pilot and Caiaphas. He is referring to the demonic rulers of the age, who were completely blind-sided by the work that was hidden within the crucifixion. They never saw it coming. If they had, they would never have tried to kill the Lord.

Of course that still begs the question – how did the atonement actually bring about all of these benefits? What is it about Jesus' death and resurrection that could unleash this kind of power to change both the nature of creation and our relationship with God? What exactly did God see as the core issues that needed to be resolved, and how did their resolution bring about such incredible results? What are the connecting threads in all of this? To answer these questions, we need to reflect on two overarching themes.

1. God's original intention for creation.
2. The necessary elements for the restoration of creation.

God's Original Intention

When God set about to create a three-dimensional universe and populate a small rocky planet with human beings, He had a particular purpose in mind. He wanted a special kind of spiritual being upon whom He could shower His love, and with whom He could have an eternal relationship!

God already existed in a heavenly realm with myriads of created beings who adored Him and with whom He had a wonderful relationship. But He was so full of love, He determined to create creatures who were far more fragile and in need of a Father, so He could give more and do more for them.¹ Over and over in the Old Testament we see God's desire to have a people for Himself, and how He wrestled with Israel for their hearts and minds so He could be their God. And when He announces His plans for a New Covenant, its declared purpose is so that “they will be my people and I will be their God” (Jer.24:7 and elsewhere).

The New Covenant was in fact the beginning of a new creation. Sin had wreaked havoc with God's original creation and God's desire to live with us. And that points us to the core problem that needed to be addressed. Sin by its very nature defiles its host, it blinds, it causes people to turn away from God, to align

¹ Contrary to some who teach that humans were created for the purpose of some kind of cosmic test of obedience or choices between good and evil.

with forces and principles that are opposed to God, and in the end it causes death (James.1:15). Sin is not only an unholy act, it is also a disease that invades and corrupts every aspect of human life. It works its way into our soul and becomes a part of our very identity, of who we are. And as a result, we are incapable of a relationship with a Holy God.

In other words, sin destroyed God's children and the family upon which He wanted to shower His love. If we pay attention to the words of the prophets, Israel's departure from God broke His heart. He often likened their idolatry to being unfaithful in a covenant relationship. He had done everything He could to win their hearts and minds, but they lost their way and went off on their own. Generation after generation, God tried to call them back. In the end, He declared that the covenant was so broken and people were so unable to keep it that He needed to start over and establish a different kind of covenant.

The Necessary Elements for Restoration

In order to inaugurate a New Covenant that would bring about a new family of God, a remedy needed to be found for the basic problem that had destroyed His original creation. God needed to deal with sin and death, and forever disarm their power, so people could be free to live for Him. This meant that above all, there had to be a way to cleanse our soul from the defilement of sin. If that could be accomplished, then everything else would naturally follow. Once free from sin we could again live forever, we could be transformed into people who lived as God intended, we could be in relationship with God Himself and receive the love He has for us and the good things He wants to do in us. That transformation would release us from the grasp of the enemy and place us under the lordship of Christ. Everything depended on dealing a death blow to the power of sin itself.

If we look back at the Old Covenant, God had provided a means for them to deal with the ongoing issue of sin and defilement. The Law contains a number of prescribed washings and cleansings, all designed to purify people who had become defiled by day to day life in the world. There were several variations of washings, mikvahs, and sacrifices, depending on how the defilement came about and how clean they needed to become.

At the apex of these ceremonies was an event of utmost importance. God called it the *Sin Offering*. Once a year on Passover, they were to take one goat and one lamb without blemish and perform a special sacrifice. As the representative of all the people, the chief priest would lay his hands on the goat and confess over it the sins of the people. It was meant to symbolize the transfer of all their sin onto the goat, which was then sent away into the wilderness, presumably to die from the curse of sin that had been placed upon it.

Then the perfect lamb would be killed, and its life blood would be sprinkled in a specified manner, symbolizing the transfer of undefiled life from the lamb to the people. In this way, a tremendous exchange took place in the ceremony. The people exchanged their sin for the life of the lamb. In so doing, they were able to become cleansed of the sin in their bodies and live for another year.²

2 It is important to note that nothing in the Sin Offering implied there was any form of punishment carried out on either the goat or the lamb. What happened to them was the consequence of the exchange which took place. Sin kills. Transferring sin to the goat meant that it would die. Transferring the life of the lamb to the people meant that the lamb would necessarily give up its life for them. Nothing about this implies anything about punishment for sin. Nor is punishment a requirement in order for God to forgive His people.

Now what we see from the writer of Hebrews is that this annual Sin Offering was far more symbolic than it was effectual (Heb.10:4). The life of a lamb was insufficient to produce eternal life in a human being. A far more powerful kind of life was needed in order to accomplish the necessary transformation and to create a people of God who could live with Him forever. The Sin Offering spelled out in the Law was a foretaste of what was needed, but it was not enough.

That brings us to God's biggest secret of all – what no one would have ever guessed – that He Himself, in the person of Jesus, would become the ultimate Sin Offering. He alone was capable of taking on the power of sin and death, and then laying down His life to destroy that evil. Paul tells us that Jesus “gave Himself to redeem us ... and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession” (Titus.2:14). This was so hidden from view, it was only some time after Jesus' death and resurrection that the disciples began to see its meaning. Because at the time of His death, they could only see the tragedy that was unfolding before their eyes, the miscarriage of justice, and the loss of their dream for the end of Roman rule. No one saw what was really happening except Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.

If we could pull back the curtain of heaven, I imagine that not even the heavenly hosts understood at the time what the Father had in mind. We can almost see them with their eyes riveted on the Father who is watching the scene with both sorrow and the anticipation of total victory. Only the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could look ahead to the millions who would one day exchange their sin for the life of the Lamb. Only they could see the final creation of the family they had always wanted. The rest of heaven had to trust that the Father knew what He was doing, and believe this would all turn out well. If I might be permitted a bit of license, perhaps one of the elders dared to ask, “Father ... what are You doing? You are Life itself, how can You taste death? You are Holiness personified, how can You hold all that evil?” To which the Father may have replied, “Yes, and I am also Everlasting Love. I will not let them all die without hope. I want them for my own, and I will do whatever it takes to free them from sin and give them new life so we can be together forever.” God Himself paid dear for our freedom. His love for us cost more than we can ever imagine.

One thing we can be sure of is that Satan himself missed it completely. Otherwise, he would not have entered Judas to betray Jesus or deceived the Jewish leaders into calling for His death. Through the voices of the mockers we hear Satan jeering, laughing, totally convinced he has destroyed Jesus' mission on earth. He still thinks he is winning this confrontation. And the reason he could be so blind-sided by this whole thing was because in his evil condition there was no way he could conceive of love so amazing, so sacrificial, that God would give Himself completely to restore our relationship to Him.

Over and over in the New Testament we see the authors refer to the work of the cross in terms of a Sin Offering and its ability to cleanse our sin: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn.1:29). The writer of Hebrews is not subtle at all, but spells out the sacrifice of Jesus as clearly as anyone can, and its power to eradicate sin is a major theme of the book. Even a quick review of references to the cross reveals the fact that the early Church had a robust understanding of the atonement which they drew from the meaning embedded in the Jewish Sin Offering. As such, it becomes clear that the primary purpose of Jesus' death was to provide the means by which we could exchange our sin and death for His cleansing and life (e.g. 1Pet.3:18+).

Nothing less could have saved us. Given the huge gap between the spiritual state of humanity and the kind of relationship God wanted with us, it was absolutely essential for God to provide the means for us to be cleansed of our sin disease and to be given new life. Only something greater than the annual Sin Offering would suffice for those needs. Yet no one could foresee the radical manner in which God would resolve this issue.

The Big Picture of Redemption

All of this is brought together beautifully in Psalm 22, an incredibly prophetic psalm on many levels. When Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He was in fact reciting this psalm. But He did not stop there. And we need to read it all the way through in order to understand why this was actually encouraging to Him as He endured such suffering. Of course, given the nature of crucifixion, it was extremely difficult for Him to utter a single phrase. But if we look closely, I think we see sufficient evidence to support the idea that He silently walked through the entire psalm, both for encouragement and as a way of revealing some important elements of His death to us.

The first half of the psalm goes into great detail about the nature of His suffering. “All my bones are out of joint ... they cast lots for my clothes ... all who see me mock me ... my heart is like wax.” No one can doubt that Jesus saw Himself in that psalm. But we need to keep reading. Referring to His Father, He says,

For He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; He did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to Him (Ps.22:24).

Jesus is telling us that His Father did not turn away or abandon Him as He hung there on the cross (contrary to popular belief). Despite all He is experiencing, and the overwhelming darkness of sin that must have clouded His perceptions, He knew in the depths of His being that His Father was with Him in this terrible moment. And along with His Father, He could see where this was all leading – to victory over Satan, and to the restoration of millions of people who did not even exist yet.

For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations ... posterity will serve him, future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim His deliverance to a people yet unborn (Ps.22:28-31).

These are all benefits of the New Covenant, the very reasons for which He died. Reclaiming dominion over the earth and making a way for people to be delivered from evil was all part of what He was accomplishing there on the cross. And then comes the final phrase of the psalm, the clincher that seals the victory:

Future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim His deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying “He has done it!” (Ps.22:30-31).

In that final phrase we hear Jesus' statement as He makes it all the way through the psalm and declares to all creation, “*It is finished!*” This is why the writer of Hebrews can conclude that Jesus endured the cross “for the joy set before Him,” the joy of destroying the work of the enemy, of taking back dominion, and of rescuing countless people from sin and death.

When God set about to redeem us and recreate a people for Himself, He devised a plan to amazing, so unbelievable in its scope, that no one guessed what was coming – not even Satan. From before time, He hid the true nature of the restoration He planned for creation, and He kept it hidden until it was revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

Above all, God revealed the depths of His love for us. Of that we can be sure. And the more we see the cross from God's perspective, the greater will be our love for Him.

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This article was adapted from a presentation given at the 2016 Lenten Retreat sponsored by the Church of the Apostles in Fairfax, Virginia.

Footnote: (If you are still enjoying the above article, please wait to read this, as it could spoil the impact).

I realize there will be some who read this and wonder why there is no mention of satisfying the wrath of God or providing “justice” for sin. To answer that well would require a book. The truth is that the atonement is far more grand and takes sin far more seriously than the theory most of us were taught in which God had to take out His wrath on Jesus, an idea that was never articulated anywhere in Scripture. It is in fact a misreading of various texts and a misunderstanding of atonement that brought about the idea that God could not forgive us until He had punished someone for sin. But of course, if payment is required, then it is not really forgiveness at all. Nor does punishment resolve any of the problems that destroyed creation in the first place. And that is only the tip of the iceberg of the sound biblical reasons as to why wrath and punishment could not be in view on the cross. Thankfully, theologians have begun to rethink this terrible theory. Perhaps sometime soon a better understanding of atonement will once again be commonly taught among laypersons.

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