

Images flashed into my mind triggering a deep sense of regret. The growing catalogue of memories of my troubled interactions with those around me was becoming a burden to my soul. My search for peace was now in earnest. As I reflected on some of my recent outbursts I felt a sense of self-loathing and a desire to be a different person from what I realised myself to be at that moment. The word that crystallised in my mind at that moment was *forgiveness* and my need for it.

Have you ever come to that point in your life where you realise that the person you are is not someone that you like, and yet after many attempts to change yourself, you arrive back at the same place with the same burdened feeling? How do you escape from the disturbing image that you see in yourself?

This experience proves true the words of the Bible.

...No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. Romans 3:10-12 (NLT)

There are many who seek to escape this condition by blinding themselves to their own character flaws and focusing on the faults of others. As all of us have character flaws it is easy to find something in another person to blame for a difficult situation in which we might find ourselves. Seeking to find peace for our souls in this way will inevitably damage the relationships we have with others and in the end cause us even greater sorrow and loneliness.

The only path to peace and freedom is to take responsibility for our own issues and seek for forgiveness from our Maker.

Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Matthew 5:2-4

It was in exactly this condition that I found myself. I was mourning about my selfishness and the pain that I inflicted on others through my need for attention.

I was raised in a Christian home and I had been taught about the love of God as manifested in Jesus Christ. As a child I had heard these words spoken several times:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28

I was encouraged by the thought that I could come to Jesus to find rest and relief from my burden. I began to reflect on the life of Christ and especially the final scenes related to His death. The story of the Cross has tremendous power for the broken soul that has come to the end of its ability to save itself. The Cross has transformed the lives of millions giving them peace and hope. Yet it contains an enigma. How can a story of betrayal, torture and the slaughter of an innocent man 2000 years ago bring peace to my soul? How is this relevant to me today?

At first, this story feels counter-intuitive. Would it not make more sense to enter a space of quietness filled with sweet aromatic incense and peaceful music surrounded by natural beauty to bring such peace? As the story of the Cross comes to life in the soul, we hear the sounds of soldiers yelling, the loud crack of a whip across the back of Christ, the sickening thud of a large wooden cross falling to the ground as the Saviour faints under its weight. We hear the jeering of the crowd and witness contorted faces delighting in the scenes of brutality.

What is the secret to this enigma? How can this story give me peace? How can there be serenity derived from slaughter?

There is a strong desire to avert one’s gaze from the scene and yet there is this drawing power that wills you to behold the playing out of this drama. Somehow its brutality is strangely familiar and at the same time horrifying. We arrive at the place of the skull – Golgotha. Christ meekly lies down upon this instrument of torture; blood has been streaming from His face due to the mock crown made of thorns that has been beaten into His head by the mob. The men suffering this fate with him resist desperately, seeking to delay the inevitable. The Saviour’s back is unrecognisable from the lashings received a little earlier. But what has this man done to deserve this treatment?

A short read through the Gospel story reveals a life filled with compassion, kindness and the most beautiful pictures painted of His Father in heaven who is full of love and kindness. How is it possible that this man should face such barbaric treatment?

The loud chink of metal on metal arrests our attention as spikes are driven through those tender hands that had blessed so many.

Those precious feet that had walked the dusty roads of Israel were now pierced and fastened to the wooden cross. The cross is then lifted up and thrust violently into place for all the world to encounter, for this event left on record in Scripture would be told and read by millions from that point forward.

As I pondered this Cross event in my search for relief of my guilt, my heart went out in sympathy to this innocent man who also is the Son of God. My mind traced His steps from Gethsemane to Calvary. I pondered the words of Pilate the Roman governor:

Behold the man. John 19:5

I watched Him stagger and fall in the garden sweating drops of blood in intense agony. I watched as His disciples fled and left Him to the mercy of the mob. I wondered in amazement how the crowd could choose Barabbas and want to crucify the Son of God. Why are they doing this? What evil has He done to deserve this? I watched as He was mocked, beaten and abused:

And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. Matthew 27:28-31

The temptation to blame the heartless actors in this drama was strong but I then thought of my own heartless treatment of others and realized I was guilty just like them. The words of Christ come to mind:

...Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. Matthew 25:40

Had I not laughed and mocked at others? Had I not watched movies depicting brutality and rejoiced when those I understood to be villains met their demise? Had not curse words fallen from my lips against those I deemed had wronged me? My sense of condemnation increased as I read. As I meditated upon the two men dying alongside Jesus I identified with the words of the man who said:

And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong. Luke 23:41

The condemnation I had heaped upon others who had hindered and inconvenienced me previously now came home with force as I beheld Christ upon the Cross. I felt the impact of the words:

For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. Matthew 7:2

In an eternal moment I became transfixed by my gaze upon the Cross. Although literally 2000 years from this event, I felt myself to be there as a witness to the drama. My world went into slow motion and the noise and the commotion around the Cross went quiet as I looked upon the Son of God and studied that beautiful face, then the words come forth from His lips.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” Luke 23:34

As the significance of the words penetrated my soul, a spark of hope ignites within. Forgiveness so long desired and hoped for presents itself before me eloquently. As I kneel before my Maker with tears streaming down my cheeks, I look into the face of love and my heart melted. In that face was not one thread of condemnation. I had a strong sense of the reality that my sinful life was part of the reason He was suffering on the Cross and yet there was no condemnation from Him – only love and forgiveness.

He didn’t blame me for the suffering I caused Him. He freely forgave me. The question was and is, will I accept it? Will I believe that I am forgiven? In my case I took it with both hands and claimed my inheritance of eternal life. I told Jesus I was sorry for what I had done and I asked Him to be Lord of my life. Instantly a peace came over me, so healing, so calming, so freeing. The burden of guilt that was crushing me vanished and I felt a joy in my soul that cannot be described but only experienced by those who embrace it.

Like a fountain of living water, the tears poured forth from my eyes in gratitude. The rest that I was seeking was finally mine. The gratitude I felt was immense and I happily submitted to the Lordship of my Saviour.

Such was, and is, my blessed and beautiful encounter with the Cross. It raises many questions. How can something so beautiful emerge from something so horrible? How does this event that played out 2000 years ago feel like it happened today? What are the key elements that brought this about and why should you care about this question of the Cross and your own personal encounter with it?

Why was the Cross required and who required it? Why was the Cross necessary for our salvation? Was God’s wrath satisfied by the death of His Son? What is God’s justice and is it different to our justice? Why did Jesus compare Himself to a bronze serpent on a pole? What does the Israelite Sanctuary tell us about the Cross?

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***Cross Examined and Cross Encountered***

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