

Lenten Study:

“Questioning Our Grip on the Cross”



Study 5

What exactly did Jesus' death on the cross “do”?

Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

PRELIMINARY NOTES

This Lenten Study has been prepared for use in study groups at Blackwood Uniting Church and other interested groups. It is hoped that engaging with this study series will, in some small way, lead to a deepening of understanding and an enlivening of personal faith.

It has been my observation that there are some people for whom reflection on their beliefs and understanding of the Christian faith seems not to be so terribly important, so focussed are they on compassionately *living* their faith, through acts of service and love. If you are in that category, all I ask is that I continue to be permitted to sit at your feet and to learn from, and be inspired by, the ways of your heart.

It is my view that Christian practices, including engaging in studies such as this, are valuable insofar as they contribute to our change and growth as human beings, better enabling us to engage positively with the world, and lovingly and compassionately with those around us. Whether this study contributes in such a way remains to be seen, but...*one lives in hope!*

A word about the reflection questions that accompany each study. Please consider these as suggestive, rather than prescriptive. They are not questions which I'm expecting you to answer like it's some sort of exam! Some of the questions I have raised may be questions that also come to *your* mind. Some questions may not have occurred to you, and you may deem them worthy of exploration. Other questions may have no interest or relevance to you at all.

To the extent that the questions are helpful in facilitating discussion in your group, or sparking your own thoughts, use them. Otherwise consider them of no account.

TWO WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THE STUDY SERIES:

Study documents and YouTube video clips

Study participants have two ways in which they can engage with the study materials. Firstly, there are the printed studies, which are also available as downloadable PDF documents that can be viewed on your computer, tablet or smartphone. Secondly, there are YouTube videos for each of the seven studies. It is hoped that these two study media will complement each other, but either can be used separately too.

How each group approaches the study is, of course, up to them. I would anticipate, however, that it may be helpful for a study group to first watch together the YouTube video for the particular week's study, and then discuss the study, using the printed/PDF study notes as a reference. The links to the downloadable PDF files and to the YouTube videos can be found at:

<http://blackwooduc.org.au/downloads/studies/lentenstudy2022>

I hope that you appreciate this study series *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*.

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Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*

A brief recap of what we've covered in the Lenten study so far

STUDY 1: Making sense of the world. Making sense of God.

- We considered the human need to make sense of the world through many avenues, including philosophy, science and religion.
- We considered how religions can be viewed as “models” to understand the world.
- Christianity can, likewise, be seen as a model to understand the world, ourselves and God.
- No individual Christian possesses God’s Capital-T Truth. What each of us understands is limited and likely includes errors.
- We explored how monotheistic religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity) face a major challenge in making sense of an apparently less-than-perfect world being created by a perfect, all-powerful and all-loving God. The “Please explain!!!” that this evokes is what theologians call the *theodicy* problem.
- We examined the Bible, seeking to test the “all-loving” nature of the God which Christians assert is consistently revealed in the Bible.
- We reflected on Old Testament texts where not only is God *not* all-loving, but actually hateful, vindictive, violent and, at times, genocidally violent.
- We looked at these texts of horror-masquerading-as-the-will-of-God *in order to sensitize ourselves to violence from the outset*. During this Lenten Study series we will be following two threads – the threads of *violence* and *love* – that will lead us to the cross.



STUDY 2: What would you be prepared to do to keep the cross?

- This study invited us, by means of a fable, into an alternate reality where Jesus *wasn't* crucified, but instead lived to a ripe old age, preaching, teaching and healing and then, one night, simply dying in his sleep. We reflected on what we felt about such an alternate reality. Would that be okay? Would that be terrible? How tightly do we cling to the cross, and why, and what would we be prepared to do in order to keep it?



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STUDY 3: What to do with a crucified Messiah?

- We considered the expectations surrounding the long-anticipated arrival of a special “Messiah” and how *none* of these expectations involved this Messiah getting himself crucified!
- We examined the fancy footwork of the New Testament writers in enthusiastically “mining” the Old Testament scriptures for evidence that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah and that he was actually meant to die on the cross. They did so by taking OT passages out of context and inappropriately applying them to Jesus.
- The mining of OT passages by the NT writers occurred in the context of the sacrificial culture of their Jewish faith, in which animal sacrifice was the unchallenged norm. In this context, Jesus’ death on the cross came to be seen, naturally enough, as a sacrifice to God.
- The phrases and images of the NT writers, in which Jesus was seen as sacrifice, ransom, sin-carrier, mercy seat, Lamb of God, Redeemer, were insufficient to form a systematic theology of the cross. Such a systematic theology would take hundreds of years after Jesus’ death to be developed.



STUDY 4: The “Solution” to the Problem of the Cross: Fall-Salvation Theology

- This study examines, through a whimsical dialogue between an inquirer and the 4th Century theologian Augustine of Hippo whom I assigned, with blatant disregard for historical timelines, as the spokesperson for “Fall-Salvation Theology.”
- Fall-Salvation theology is simple in its essence:
 - We are “fallen”
 - Therefore we require “salvation”
 - Jesus’ death on the cross was the means of our salvation
- Fall-Salvation theology necessitates a certain reading of, and a certain set of assumptions surrounding, chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis.
- We began the study by reading the text of Genesis chapters 2 and 3, assessing the text in its own right and not “importing” any assumptions into the text.
- The whimsical dialogue then “unpacked” the “logic” of Fall-Salvation theology, which requires, as its underpinning, belief in a literal first couple, in a literal garden who, tempted by a literal serpent, took a literal forbidden fruit.



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Where are we at now in our study series?

Let's see if we can take stock of where we have arrived after studies 1-4 .

According to Fall-Salvation theology, we need to believe in the following logic...

1. That the foretold "Messiah" was, "according to scripture," *meant* to be tortured and brutally killed on a cross and that, furthermore, this was "God's will."
2. That the reason Jesus-as-Messiah was *meant* to be crucified was to "save" us.
3. That the reason we needed "saving" is that we are "fallen."
4. That there was a time when human beings were "unfallen," existing in a sinless state of "Original Righteousness."
5. That the whole human race "fell" into the morally corrupted state of "Original Sin" when a literal first human couple, tempted by a literal serpent, took and ate of the literal forbidden fruit in the primordial garden.
6. That at "The Fall" death itself entered into the world (there was no death prior to it)
7. That at "The Fall" *not only* was human nature corrupted, *but so too* the entire cosmos (previously perfect), thus bringing about a world where natural disasters and disease abound.
8. That every human who has ever lived, including us, shares in the guilt of the first human couple in taking the forbidden fruit.
9. That because of "The Fall" and the consequent corruption and tainting of human nature by "Original Sin," we humans were destined to be eternally punished by God.
10. That God, in God's infinite mercy, resolved to "save" us from this eternal punishment.
11. That the means of our salvation, decreed by God, was to offer his only Son, Jesus Christ, as the perfect human sacrifice, thereby allowing God to forgive us our sin.

I think that pretty much covers it.

A critique of Fall-Salvation theology is called for at this point, a critique that might suggest certain shortcomings:

*That...*it is morally repugnant

*That...*it is intellectually indefensible

*That...*it is logically incoherent

*That...*it represents a wilful misuse of biblical texts

*That...*the FALL in Fall-Salvation theology might best be understood as an *acronym*:

F: **Farcical**
A: **Assumptions**
L: **Leavened by**
L: **Literalism**

But are we being too hasty in dismissing Fall-Salvation theology?

Perhaps though we're being too judgemental on the moral and intellectual deficits of Fall-Salvation theology. Perhaps we are being too pedantic about the need for theology to make sense, and too precious about the desire to hold onto belief in a God who doesn't demand human sacrifice.

Perhaps we need to lighten up?!

Perhaps we need to embrace the philosophy of consequentialism: *the end justifies the means*.

Putting the moral and intellectual deficiencies of Fall-Salvation theology to one side, *if* the agonising torture and death of Jesus on the cross *does* indeed solve the problem of existence and of human nature described in the theology, *then who can argue?!*

Surely the proof of the pudding is in the *eating?!*

If Jesus' death on the cross did indeed win our salvation, then *who are we to argue?!*

Study 5 will examine, therefore, the critical question:-

What exactly did Jesus' death on the cross “do”?



We begin by examining a significant strand of Fall-Salvation theology (*Christus Victor* – or “Christ the Victor”) which posits that, on the cross, Jesus Christ defeated the powers of sin and death that enslave humanity.

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Jesus' "defeat" of sin and death on the cross

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:13-15)

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:20-23)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8:1-2)

A memorable sermon...

I can recall a sermon from many years ago in which the preacher, with a beaming smile, announced this *Good News* to the congregation:

"On the cross, Jesus Christ defeated sin and death!"

Puzzled, I looked around.
Was he talking about *this* world?
Was he saying that, on the cross, Jesus Christ defeated sin and death in *this* world?!

If so, I was puzzled indeed.

The "defeat" of sin and death in the Real World...

By some estimates, in the 20th century alone some 160 million people died through war and genocide: World War I and II, the killing fields of Pol Pot's Cambodia, the Rwandan genocide, countless wars; and that is *just* the 20th century. The roughly two thousand years following Jesus' death and resurrection have been awash in cruelty and death, as they were in the years leading up to Jesus' birth. We need to ask a pointed question.

What, objectively, has changed in the 2,000 years since Jesus' crucifixion?



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In the face of the evidence around us, it is hard to mount a persuasive argument to the effect that Jesus' death on the cross has “saved the world” or “defeated sin” or “defeated death.”

As a Christian, you may respond by asserting that the ongoing evils of the secular world in in no way contradict the saving grace of Christ's death and resurrection, because this saving grace applies *only* to believing Christians. It is in the behaviour of *believing Christians* in the world where one sees the saving grace of Christ at work. If so, then let's consider the positive and negative sides of the Christian ledger since Christ's saving death and resurrection some 2,000 years ago.

But what about the effectiveness of Jesus' death on *Christian* behaviour alone?

The Corporate Ledger for the behaviour of Christians over the past 2,000 years	
PROS:	CONS:
Works of Christian charity	Religious wars: Christians killing Christians
The establishment of hospitals	The Crusades: Christians killing non-Christians
The establishment of schools	The Inquisition, Anti-Semitism
Foreign missions to help the impoverished	Religious persecution and bigotry, institutional child sex abuse

It would be an interesting exercise to tally the Corporate Christian Ledger over the past 2,000 years in order to see whether the Christian faith has been a net *positive* or a net *negative* for the world. No matter how one “weights” the various pros and cons on the ledger, it is inescapable that Christian human behaviour since Jesus’ death has been deeply ambivalent, and anything but a resounding endorsement of Jesus alleged “defeat of sin and death” on the cross.

Based on its effectiveness at defeating sin and death *in this world*, it can only be said that Jesus' death on the cross *was an abject failure*

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The variability in Christian and Non-Christian behaviour

Let's consider the wide variability in the behaviour of people, both Christian and non-Christian. As one engages with others in this world, one encounters:

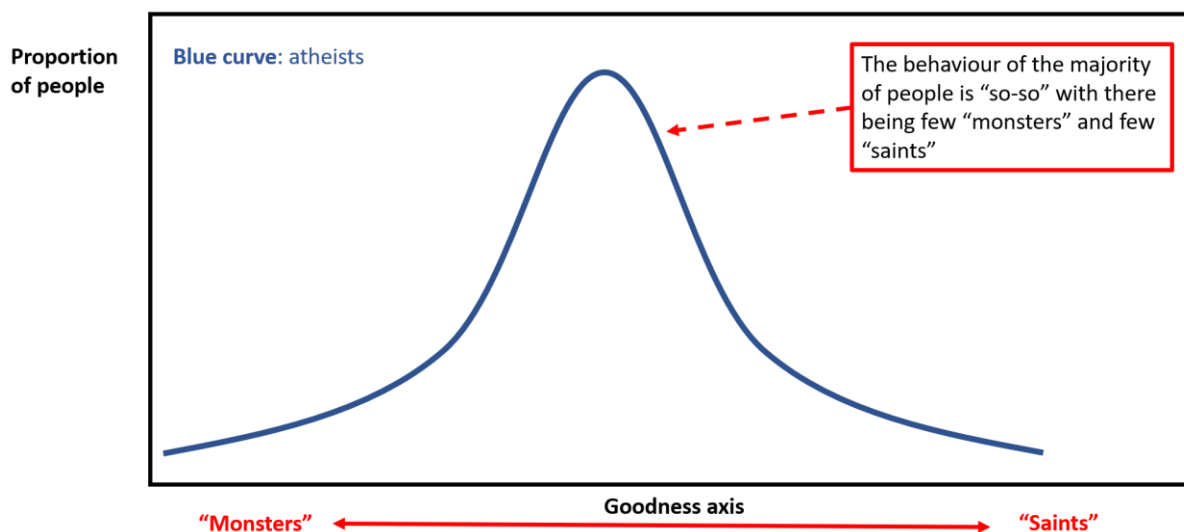
- Individual Christians who are sublimely beautiful people
- Individual Christians who are genuinely horrible people
- Individual Atheists or people of other faiths who are sublimely beautiful people
- Individual Atheists or people of other faiths who are genuinely horrible people

And we see Christians and non-Christians who are everything in between.

How might the overall, *collective* behaviour of Christians and non-Christians compare?

In any given population, it is possible to evaluate the variability of any given parameter, such as age, height, salary, etc by plotting this variability as a “normal distribution.” With this in mind, what about looking at the variability in “goodness” within a population of people, starting with a population of atheists.

Consider the distribution of “goodness” in a population of atheists

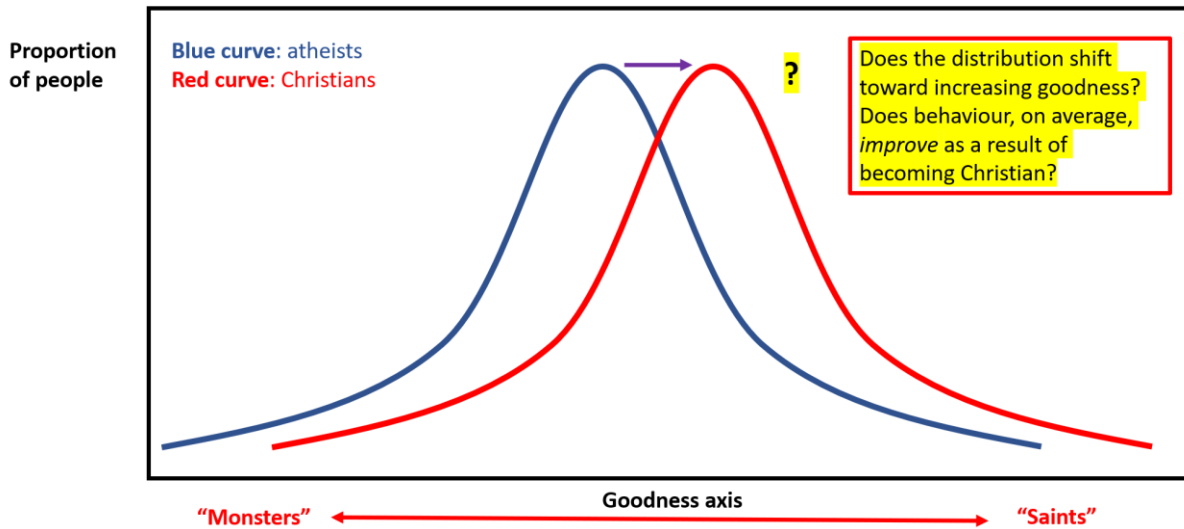


In the above plot, we have the proportion of people on the vertical axis and the “goodness” of people on the horizontal axis, with “saints” being to the far right and “monsters” to the far left. In this particular population of atheists, the majority of people (represented by the big lump in the middle) are “so-so” in their behaviour, with there being few “monsters” and few “saints.”

Now, what would we *expect* to happen if, miraculously, everyone in this population of atheists was to “convert” to Christianity? What would happen to the “distribution of goodness” curve? Would we expect the distribution to shift toward increasing goodness? Should behaviour, on average, *improve* as a result of becoming Christian, as per the following plot (the new Christian curve being shown in red)?

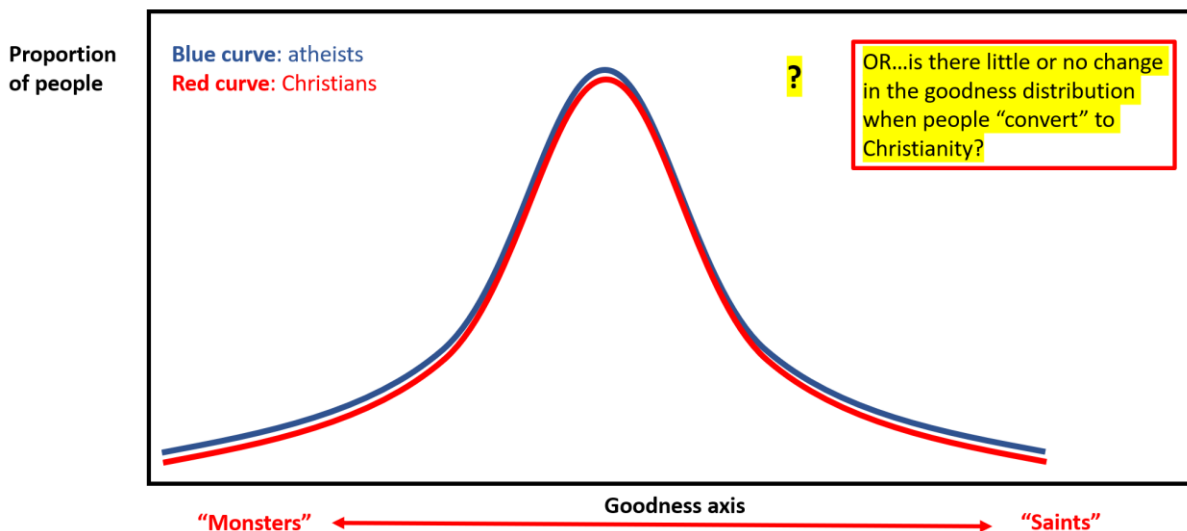
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What happens to the “goodness distribution” if the atheists “convert” to Christianity?



This would be a happy state of affairs: that the *Christianising* of a population would *increase*, on the average, the goodness of people.

Do we believe this would represent the *actual* outcome if such a thought experiment were to be made *real*? Another possibility might be that “converting” to Christianity didn’t shift the curve at all, like the following plot.



Friedrich Nietzsche once said:-

“I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed.”

Collectively, how “redeemed” do we Christians look to the rest of the world?

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If we don't look terribly redeemed, might that account in part for the enormous exodus of people from Christian churches and for the lack of appeal of the Christian faith for those outside it?

To ask the inverse question:

If collectively we Christians *did* embody the “redeemed life” that Fall-Salvation theology proponents claim we have, would not the entire world flock to the Christian faith? This is the “I’ll have what they’re having!” effect.

Moving beyond dry statistics to ask a very human question

I'm going to ask a question.

But first, I need to set the scene.

A pious and learned Christian inquisitor orders a fellow Christian to be tied to a stake and burned alive for the crime of believing in God and Christ somewhat differently to the inquisitor. The inquisitor believes that he is acting righteously, doing the will of God.

QUESTION:

How can this inquisitor, a follower of Christ and a believer in an all-loving God, *possibly* engage in such an appalling act of violence against another human being?!

The same question could be posed in relation to the appalling violence committed over the centuries by so many other followers of Christ - Christian believers in an all-loving God.

If one believes in an all-loving God, *if* one is a follower of Jesus, who embodied that love in his life and ministry, then how is it possible, not only to commit such terrible acts of violence, but also to absolve oneself of all guilt, and remain, in one's own eyes, righteous?

It seems to make no sense at all.

It is as if violence is perceived by the perpetrator as love and wickedness as righteousness.

It is as if the threads of *love* and *violence* have become entangled and confused.



To seek an explanation, we need to engage in some amateur psychology.

Cognitive Dissonance

“The mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in people is relieved by one of several defensive manoeuvres: they reject, explain away, or avoid the new information; persuade themselves that no conflict really exists; reconcile the differences; or resort to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in their conceptions of the world and of themselves.”

<https://www.britannica.com/science/cognitive-dissonance>

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Here is a working hypothesis to explain violence committed by followers of Christ who worship the “all-loving” God of the Bible.

HYPOTHESIS to explain “righteous violence” by Christians:

“Righteous violence” on the part of Christians can be traced, in part, to the *cognitive dissonance* created by internalising the biblical image of a God who is **both** loving **and** violent, and the perceived necessity of absolving this God of guilt over his violence.

An internal process of what might be called “violence laundering” transforms divine violence into divine righteousness via the “Richard Nixon Defence” (when **God** does it, it’s **not** violent).

Resolving this dissonance in God’s behaviour then serves as a precedent for resolving such dissonance with our own thoughts and behaviour. Our own acts of violence are, through the process of violence laundering, converted into acts of righteousness, done in accordance with God’s will. If Moses can engage in righteous violence and genocide, all in accordance with God’s will, then so can we.

I should make clear, after offering this hypothesis, that I am *not* claiming that non-Christians aren’t capable of appalling acts of violence; they clearly are. Nor am I claiming that non-Christians are not also capable of psychologically justifying their own poor behaviour; they clearly are. The reason I am focusing on *Christian* behaviour here is that Christians claim that *being Christian*, a follower of Jesus, a follower of the “all-loving” God of the Bible, makes a positive difference to how one lives. It is therefore reasonable to assess these claims in light of evidence from the real world. When we Christians – *who are meant to be “salt and light” to the world* - observe Christian behaviour that is not only unloving, but instead hateful and violent, it is critical that we try to understand why.

REAL-WORLD REFLECTION QUESTIONS: "Real World" effects of Jesus' death on the cross

1. As a group, reflect on what you can point to as the real-world effects of Jesus' death on the cross. What did his death "do"?
2. Do you find it easy, or difficult, to distinguish between possible real-world effects resulting from Jesus' death and real-world effects resulting solely from his life and teachings?
3. What do you feel about the deep "ambivalence" in Christian behaviour in the 2,000 years since Jesus' death?
4. How poignantly does the Friedrich Nietzsche quote speak to the core theme of this study: ***"I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."***
5. If, collectively, we Christians do **not** look "redeemed" or "saved," why is that so?
6. Will it require Jesus' "Second Coming" for real-world effects to become evident? Will *"Jesus: The Sequel"* be more effective in the real-world than was the original?

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The “Other-Worldly” effects of Jesus’ death on the cross

Having pondered the real-world effects of Jesus’ death on the cross, we move on to explore what might be termed the “other-worldly” effects of Jesus’ death on the cross.

- What effects may Jesus' death on the cross have had that are *not* evident in the real-world, and *not* evident in people's behaviour?
- What effects may Jesus' death on the cross have had that are "hidden" from our view?
- What exactly did Jesus' death on the cross “do” in this "other-worldly" sense?

One key claimed “other-worldly” effect of Jesus’ death on the cross is something referred to as “*justification by faith*.”

Therefore, since we are *justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)

For we hold that a person is *justified by faith* apart from works prescribed by the law (Romans 3:28)

But to one who without works trusts him who *justifies* the ungodly, such faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:5)

According to Fall-Salvation theology, *justification by faith* in Christ is a process whereby Christ's righteousness is credited or "imputed" to us.

The Apostle Paul, provided, in chapters 3 and 4 of his Letter to the Romans, the scriptural basis for this justification by faith doctrine, and in Romans 4:3 quotes from Genesis 15:6.

As it is written: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10)

For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3)

But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness (Romans 4:5)

In effect, Paul is arguing that:

- *No-one* is righteous by their own merit (Romans 3:10)
- That one’s belief or faith in God is counted by God as “equivalent” to righteousness (Romans 4:3 quoting Genesis 15:6)
- That if *we* have faith then, just as God credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness, so will God count *our* faith as righteousness.

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This doesn't mean that we actually become righteous, or that our behaviour changes; there is no real-world effect, merely that God counts us as righteous. It is as if there exists a "Celestial Ledger" with two columns: a *faith* column and a *righteousness* column. Our personal righteousness column is *empty* for the reason given above. *If*, however, we have faith in God, God effectively debits the faith column and credits the righteousness column, so that we are *counted as righteous* in God's eyes.

Celestial Ledger	
FAITH	RIGHTEOUSNESS
Debit	Credit

It is our justification through this "imputed righteousness" that is critical in our salvation, according to the proponents of Fall-Salvation theology. Our real-world behaviour, what might be termed our degree of *righteousness-in-the-real-world*, is quite irrelevant in earning our salvation. Quoting Ephesians 2:8-9 they will say:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

According to this doctrine of justification by faith, one could, theoretically, be a mass murderer (e.g. Moses – see Numbers 31) but provided one had faith in God, then Christ's righteousness would be imputed to you and salvation would be yours.

Paul's argument, in Romans 4, for "faith being credited as righteousness" hangs on the supporting verse from Genesis 15:6 which states:-

Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.

It is worth noting that the original Hebrew of Genesis 15 does *not* explicitly identify the subject of the verb "to reckon." This means that an equally valid translation, and indeed a translation that makes much more sense given the context, is:

Abraham believed the Lord, and credited God as righteous.

In other words, rather than this Genesis 15 verse referring to some celestial accounting system that equates faith and righteousness, *it was simply Abraham believing in God because he was believing in a righteous God who should be believed in.*

Such a translation, however, would not support Paul's argument, nor the argument of Fall-Salvation theology proponents.

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Some other possible “other-worldly” effects of Jesus’ death on the cross

There are at least two other, related other-worldly effects that Jesus’ death on the cross is meant to have achieved. We recall that, according to Fall-Salvation theology, we are destined for eternal punishment because of the sin of “Adam and Eve,” so these two possible effects of the death of Jesus on the cross are:-

Other-worldly effect option A:

We are spared eternal punishment, and go to heaven when we die, spending eternity with God.

Other-worldly effect option B:

We are spared eternal punishment, and get bodily resurrected at the final judgment, spending eternity with God.

OTHER-WORLDLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS: "Other Worldly" effects of Jesus' death on the cross

1. What personal meaning has the phrase "justification by faith" for you?
2. What linkage do you see between Jesus' death on the cross and what happens when you die?
3. Are there additional "other-worldly" effects of Jesus' death that come to mind?

REGARDING THE NEXT STUDY:

In *this* study, we have spent quite some time looking at the *collective* behaviour of human beings, including Christians. In the next study, we shall move from the collective to the *personal*.

In the *next* study we shall set aside the following:

Collective and statistical assessments of Christian behaviour...

Generalities and commentaries on Christian behaviour...

Theologies, doctrines and dogma...

Philosophies...

And...ideas and concepts that have been raised in this study itself...

We shall set all these aside and move instead to the *personal*.

We shall focus on the very personal: *Jesus and you*.

Because of the different nature of this next, penultimate study in our Lenten series, I strongly recommend that you approach it in a particular way. With all the other studies, it wasn't the end of the world if you came to the group session "cold" (i.e. having not read the material beforehand). The YouTube videos for each session do, I believe, assist group participants who haven't engaged with the material beforehand in entering into the study.

However, with study 6, because it is so personal, you will get considerably more value out of it if you engage with the study privately and reflectively prior to the group session.

Whilst you can do this private work with either the YouTube video or the printed/PDF notes, I believe it may aid the intimacy of this personal study by privately engaging with the printed/PDF notes.