

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes people ask me what the "O." stands for in David O. Dykes. My middle name is Orlo, which was my dad's first name. Since I didn't have any sons, I thought that name was going to die with me—but my younger brother named his only son John Orlo Dykes. My dad, Orlo, died of cancer on May 29, 1981.

For illustration purposes, let's imagine when I was a 12-year-old boy, living in Florala, Alabama that my dad took me aside and said, "David, when I'm 58 years old, I'm going to be diagnosed with liver cancer in January of 1981. I'll be living in Mobile then and Dr. David Clarkson will be my physician. The cancer will spread to my brain and bones, and I'll be admitted to Mobile Infirmary Hospital. Then at 7:15 p.m. on Friday evening, May 29, 1981, I'm going to die—and I'm going to heaven. My body will be buried in Panama City, Florida. By the way, son, you'll be a pastor then and you'll preach my funeral."

How would I react to that? I'd say, "Dad, you're crazy! Don't talk like that!" But what if he kept on repeating that prediction to me through the years? And then, sure enough—it happened just as he predicted. It would make me think my dad must have either been a prophet, or his prediction was just a lucky guess. But given the amount of details, what are the odds of him guessing that? What are the odds of you predicting exactly when and where and how you'd die?

Well, there is Someone who did that, and His name is Jesus. For all of His Divine existence, and for much of His human existence Jesus knew exactly when and how He would die. He knew He would be nailed to a cross during Passover, to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus lived in the Shadow of the Cross. In the series, Parables and Miracles, this could be called "The Miracle of the Prediction." Let's read how often Jesus predicted when and how He would die.

Matthew 26:1-2. "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.'"

Then skip down to verse 31. The Last Supper has concluded and Jesus makes more predictions about what will happen.

Vs. 31-34. "Then Jesus told them, 'This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.' Peter replied, 'Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.' 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, 'This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.'"

This isn't the only time and place where Jesus predicted His death. At the mid-point of His three-year ministry Jesus started predicting His death. In Matthew 16:21 we read, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Then again in Matthew 17:22-23 we read, "When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.'"

And in Matthew 20:18-19, Jesus said, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"

In 1873 the English artist, William Holden Hunt, painted a fascinating picture called "The Shadow of Death." If you're ever in Manchester, England you can see the original. In the picture, Jesus is portrayed as a young adult working in the carpenter's shop. It's at the end of the day and the floor is littered with wood shavings. The young Jesus is stretching His tired muscles, and the setting sun casts a shadow of a cross on the wall. We don't have to wonder about the symbolism because the artist himself writes, "Mary, who has been looking at the gifts of the Magi, looks up in time to perceive this prevision of the crucifixion. Her attitude tells of her fright and terror though her features are not portrayed. The weary Lord falling on the rack which holds the carpenter's tools, with the mandrel placed vertically in the centre, at once realises the form of a cross, and the hands falling thereon suggest the idea of a figure nailed thereupon, and thus, the particular death Our Lord would die." (Catalogue, "The Shadow of Death," William Holman Hunt)

In this message I want to share three foundational truths about the cross. The first two are theological truths, and the third is a practical truth.

1. THE CROSS WASN'T JUST AN AFTERTHOUGHT; IT WAS ALWAYS GOD'S PLAN

When you read the storyline of the Bible you might be tempted to think God was making everything up on the fly, because we kept messing up His plan. He created Adam and Eve and, oops! They did the one thing He told them not to do. Then the world got so evil that oops! He sent a global flood to wipe them all out except for Noah and His family. But you can rest assured that the words, "oops" or "Uh-oh" are not part of God's vocabulary. He has had a plan from the very beginning of time. The cross of Christ wasn't PLAN B when PLAN A failed.

For instance, there is a verse in Revelation that reassures us that the cross was always part of God's plan. The Bible says, "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." (Revelation 13:8)

For now, don't pay any attention to the first half of that verse (for more information, get my book on Revelation). Instead concentrate on the second half. The Lamb of God wasn't just slain two thousand years ago; He was slain from the foundation of the world. The word translated "world" doesn't mean "the earth." It's the word *kosmos*, which means the entire Creation.

God is not restricted to linear time like we are. We are limited to *chronos*, time that moves from

second to minute; minute to hour; hour to day; day to month; month to year...and so on. Psalm 90 says, "A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night [which was four hours]." (Psalm 90:4)

So let me ask you a question. Multiple choice: When was Jesus crucified? A.) 2,000 years ago? or B.) Forever. If you said, "2,000 years ago," you're thinking chronologically. If you answered "Forever" you are getting close to understanding the heart of God.

The cross is the central event in human history. We divide our calendar into Before Christ and Anno Dominus, the year of our Lord. The cross was in heart of God from the beginning of the beginning.

2. THE CROSS WASN'T JUST AN EXECUTION; JESUS WILLINGLY EMBRACED IT

Jesus lived His life in the shadow of the cross. The Romans crucified thousands of criminals. They left them hanging on trees and crosses along the roads to serve as a deterrent to rebellion from the Jews. Jesus witnessed many crucifixions during His life. And every time He saw someone hanging on a tree or a cross, He knew that would be His fate.

There have been plenty of people who died a martyr's death. In the end, they had no control over the circumstances of their death. Some liberal theologians teach that Jesus died a helpless martyr. Dr. Albert Schweitzer was an accomplished concert pianist and a gifted surgeon who spent much of his career as a missionary physician in Africa. He wrote an infamous book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, in which he attempted to "separate the man from the myth." This is how He described the crucifixion: "Jesus lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself on it. Then it does turn; and crushes him." (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, pp. 370-71) Not surprisingly, Dr. Schweitzer rejects the idea of the physical resurrection of Christ. I respectfully submit that he understood music and medicine, but he missed the point of the cross. Jesus didn't die as a martyr; He willingly chose the cross.

Jesus said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." (John 10:17-18)

Jack was a member and deacon in the first church I pastored in Alabama. He had been wounded in World War II. Surgeons had removed both his legs above the knee. But he wore two prostheses and got around as well as anyone. I've seen him climb a ladder and reroof a house. If anyone ever said, "Jack, I'm sorry you lost your legs in the war," he would always correct them. He would say, "I didn't lose my legs, I gave them for my country."

Jesus didn't lose His life on the cross; He gave it for the salvation of humanity. He wasn't a victim of death; He was a volunteer for death; then He was a victor over death!

3. THE CROSS ISN'T JUST A SYMBOL; IT IS THE DOORWAY TO LIFE

A soldier in battle was digging in a foxhole while artillery shells were landing all around him. His shovel hit something metal. He reached down and uncovered a small metal cross that had been buried. He wasn't very religious, but he clutched it for hope. At that moment another soldier, who happened to be a chaplain, scampered into the same foxhole. The soldier held out the cross toward the chaplain and said, "You're just the person I wanted to see, Padre. Can you tell me how to work this cross?" We can't work the cross, but the cross works for us, for our redemption.

Billy Graham once wrote in *Decision* magazine, "I find that I can preach on any subject other than the cross, and it does not seem as offensive to people as the cross does. I can preach on doing good works, on social improvement, and people applaud me. The offense of the cross arises chiefly from the fact that the cross condemns every other way of salvation. Jesus said, 'There is only ONE way; ONE road; ONE gate to the kingdom,' and that is the way of the cross."

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15) "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. (John 12:32-33)

When Jesus spoke these words to the Jews, they all knew the story of Moses and the bronze serpent. You may not know it; so let me tell you the full story, because it is one of the most interesting illustrations of the cross in the Old Testament. Moses was leading the Children of Israel toward the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. They came to Kadesh Barnea, right on the border of Canaan. I suspect it must have been a Baptist Congregation with Moses, because the first thing they did was elect a committee, the Holy Land Exploration Committee. It had twelve members. These twelve spies slipped across the border to check out the land. They came back and all twelve reported it was a good land. But ten of the spies said there were giants in the land and that it was impossible to conquer. But two of the spies said, "Yeah, those giants are big, but our God is bigger! Let's do it!" Can anyone name the two spies who trusted God? Joshua and Caleb. We still name our sons Joshua and Caleb. Can anyone name one of the ten who didn't trust God? Nope, I didn't think so. History forgets negative, defeated people who live by fear instead of faith.

Again, there's a clue that they were Baptists because then Moses led them in a business meeting to take a vote. Moses said, "All in favor of going in and taking the land say, 'aye!'" Joshua and Caleb say, "Aye!" Moses said, "All opposed to going in and taking the land say, 'nay!'" Remember, there were about a million people in this multitude, so there was this huge sound that echoed off the mountain ranges, "NAY!..Nay!...Nay!"

God wasn't happy that they wouldn't trust Him, so He said, "Okay, you're going to wander in the wilderness for the next generation." As Keith Green said in one of his songs, "Take another lap around Mt. Sinai."

Not long after this, the people started complaining and griping against God and against Moses. God was feeding them with manna every morning, but they griped about the lack of variety in

their menu. They said, "We detest this food." God's patience was running a little thin at the time, so the Bible says He sent poisonous snakes into the camp, and they bit the people, and many people died. Now you may be thinking, "Wow, that seems pretty cruel of God to do that." My job is not to defend God or the Bible, my job is just to proclaim it. If you have a problem with a God who sends poison snakes to bite rebellious grippers, you can take it up with God.

After a few hundred fatal snakebites, the people come to Moses and say, "We have sinned against you and against God, please ask God to take away the snakes." So Moses prayed to God, and God gave Moses a curious way to fix the problem. The Bible says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (Numbers 21:8-9)

God didn't take away the snakes; He made a way to survive them. We want God to remove all the bad things in our lives, and instead He gives us the prescription to endure and survive them. The prescription was pretty simple: Look and live. He didn't say bow down before the snake, or bring an offering to the snake, just look and live.

Jesus said that Moses' snake-on-a-stick is a picture of the cross. You may be thinking, "Pastor, I don't get the symbolism. Why a snake? A lamb I could understand, but why a snake?" I think there's a very good reason why God instructed Moses to put a snake on that pole. From the very moment Satan slithered his slimy existence before Eve, there has been something sinister and sinful and scary about snakes! Did you know a snake is the symbol of sin? God told Moses to put a snake on a pole is because this pole is a symbol of the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, He carried our sin. The Bible says in 1 Peter 2:24 that "He bore our sins in his body on the tree." So, God had Moses put a snake on the pole to show us that Jesus would carry the sins of the world on the cross. The prophet Isaiah said, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:4, 6)

Here's the truth. All of us have been snake-bitten by the fatal venom of sin. Nobody is immune. But God has given us a remedy in the cross of Christ. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus was lifted up on the cross, and if you will simply look to Jesus and trust His finished work on the cross, you can live. You can live now, and you can live eternally.

Salvation is a lot simpler than most people think. You don't have to memorize the Ten Commandments, or pray a certain prayer, or walk down an aisle, or be baptized. You simply have to LOOK and LIVE. It's not complicated. It's so simple that I did it when I was nine years old, and if you look to the cross today, you can find life.

CONCLUSION

Those of us who have been saved by looking to Jesus on the cross should share this message with everyone we meet. Before we leave this story in Numbers 21, let's push the rewind button in your mind and go back 4,000 years, and walk with me through the camp of the Israelites where poisonous snakes are slithering everywhere. Be careful and watch your step!

Think about what it must have been like in that camp, and then apply that to people we know in East Texas, because we encounter people every day who have been snake-bitten by sin. So you're in that snake-infested camp and you walk up to a person and say, "Hey. I can't help but notice you've been bitten. Good news, there's a cure! Moses put a snake on a pole and if you will look at that snake, you can be healed!" The man says, "Well, yeah! I'm bitten, but I'm not bitten worse than anyone else around me. In fact, you have folks down there at Green Acres I know who are bitten worse than I am." Sadly, there are some people who will never come to Christ because they say, "I'm no worse than anybody else!"

Then, you walk up to another man and he still has a snake attached to his arm. You say, "I see you have been bitten. You have a problem there!" He says, "Yeah. I have a problem. I admit it but you know what? I'm just going to shake this thing off myself. I've been able to handle every other problem in my life and I think I can handle this one too." Sadly, when some people realize they have a sin problem they think they can fix it themselves.

You continue your tour of the camp and venture into a tent. A man is lying on a mat. His leg is swollen and purple from a fatal snakebite. His wife runs in because she has just heard about the cure. She says, "Sweetheart! I know you have been bitten, but I have good news for you! There's a cure! Moses put a snake on a pole and God said that if you look at it you would live. Please dear, let me help you over to the opening in the tent so you can see the snake on a pole." But the man looks at his wife and says, "Are you talking about the snake on the pole theory? Would you explain to me how looking at a bronze snake on a high pole can improve my condition!" She says, "I can't explain it. God just said, 'Look and live!'" The man scoffs, and says, "I'll have none of that foolishness. The bronze serpent theory is just superstition!" And the Bible says, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

If someone asks me, "Will you explain to me how the blood of a man who died 2,000 years ago can forgive my sins?" I can't explain HOW it works; I just know it works.

Before we leave the camp, let's make one more stop. We come upon a young mother and wife named Rachel. She's weeping as she piles stones on the grave of her husband who died from the venom. Her young son, Joseph, stands at her side. As she lays a stone on the grave she hears a cry and turns in time to see a poison serpent slither away after biting Joseph. She cries, "Oh, Joseph! Joseph! Not you too!" Already his temples are beginning to pulse and his leg is beginning to swell. Rachel grabs him up in her arms and she rushes him to her tent and lays him down and gently takes a wet, moist cloth and wipes his forehead. Then somebody comes to the door of the tent and they say, "Rachel, listen! There's a cure! Moses put a snake on a pole and if you just look at it and believe God, you'll be healed!" The woman says, "How can you say that?" The person at the door of the tent says, "Because I was bitten and I looked and I am healed!" So, the mother picks up her little boy and carries him over to the door of the tent and says, "There it is, honey. Look! Just look!" Joseph obeys God's simple direction! to look and live. He trusts God and when his eyes focus on that bronze serpent, the color returns to his face, and the swelling immediately goes down. Within a few minutes he jumps down from his mother's arms—healed and delivered.

That's what can happen to any sinner when they look to the cross and trust the work of Christ. You can look and live!

Jesus lived in the shadow of the cross, and so should we. There's only one safe place to find refuge from the judgment of God against sin—and that's in the Shadow of the Cross. There's no other way to be saved except through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

An old hymn named "The Way of the Cross Leads Home" says it all: "I must needs go home by the way of the cross; There's no other way but this; I shall never get sight of the gates of light; If the way of the cross I miss!" (Words by Jessie Pounds)

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes