

Symbols and Prophecies about the Holy Cross

BIBLE BASICS

Symbols and Prophecies of the Holy Cross

“ O the divine mystery of that cross! Weakness hangs on it, power is freed by it, evil is nailed to it, and triumphal trophies are raised toward it.”

— St. Ambrose

The Holy Cross is not merely an event in history, nor only an instrument of Roman execution. It is a divine mystery at the heart of God’s saving work. What the world counted as shame, God revealed as victory. What appeared as weakness became the liberation of power; what appeared as defeat became the overthrow of evil.

St. John Chrysostom speaks of this wonder with striking boldness:

“if one were to ask me what was the most admirable thing that Christ did, I would out aside the heaven, the earth, the sea, the resurrection of the multitude of dead and all the other miracles, and I would display only the Cross which is the most glorious of all.”

The Cross is therefore not secondary to Christ’s miracles. It is the summit of His saving mission. From the fall of Adam and Eve, the divine plan of redemption moves steadily toward this point: God will heal humanity through the very means by which humanity is restored—through obedience, sacrifice, and life given unto death. For this reason, the Old Testament is filled with images that prepare the mind and heart to recognize the Cross when it finally appears in the fullness of time.

The Cross Foretold in Scripture

The Old Testament consistently prepares the people of God for a salvation that would come through suffering, obedience, and sacrificial love. Long before Christ’s crucifixion, Scripture speaks of a righteous sufferer who would bear the sins of many.

The prophet Isaiah declares:

“He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,

And by His stripes we are healed.”
(*Isaiah 53:5, NKJV*)

Likewise, the psalmist prophetically describes the crucifixion centuries before it occurred:

“They pierced My hands and My feet...
I am poured out like water,
And all My bones are out of joint.”
(*Psalms 22:16, 14, NKJV*)

These texts reveal that suffering was not accidental to salvation but essential to it. The Cross was the means by which God’s justice and mercy would meet.

The Cross as Victory, Not Defeat

Although Christ’s death appeared to be a moment of weakness, the Church proclaims it as the supreme manifestation of divine power. As St. Ambrose teaches, weakness hangs upon the Cross, yet power is released through it. Evil is nailed to it, not victorious over it, and the Cross becomes a trophy of triumph rather than a sign of loss.

Christ willingly embraced the Cross, not as a victim overtaken by circumstances, but as the obedient Son fulfilling the will of the Father:

“Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.”
(*Hebrews 10:9, NKJV*)

Through this obedience, Christ overturned Adam’s disobedience. Where the first Adam fell through a tree, the last Adam brought life through the Tree of the Cross.

The Cross as the Center of Christian Faith

For this reason, the Cross is not merely a historical reminder of Christ’s death, nor simply a religious symbol. It is the heart of Christian faith and life. From it flows forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and resurrection. Through it, death is defeated by death, and life is restored to the world.

The Church therefore does not preach Christ apart from the Cross, nor the Cross apart from Christ. To behold the Cross is to behold the mystery of God’s love revealed in suffering, humility, and self-giving sacrifice.

In the sections that follow, we will examine specific Old Testament symbols—trees, wood, rods, sacrifices, and signs—that foreshadow the Cross and reveal how deeply it is woven into the fabric of God’s saving work from the beginning.

The Tree of Life

At the very beginning of human history, Scripture places a tree at the center of God's relationship with humanity. In the Garden of Eden stood the Tree of Life, a source of immortality and communion with God. Yet Adam and Eve did not eat from this tree. Instead, they chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and through that choice, corruption, death, and separation entered the human condition.

“Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’— therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”

(Genesis 3:22–24, NKJV)

The expulsion from Eden was not an act of cruelty, but of mercy. Humanity, now corrupted by sin, could not be permitted to live forever in a fallen state. Eternal life had to be restored only after humanity itself was healed and renewed. For this reason, access to the Tree of Life was barred until redemption could be accomplished.

From the Tree of Death to the Tree of Life

The Fathers of the Church consistently interpret the Tree of Life as a type of the Cross. Humanity fell through a tree; humanity would be saved through a tree. What was lost by disobedience would be restored through obedience. What brought death would be answered by that which brings life.

The Cross becomes the new Tree of Life, planted not in Eden, but on Golgotha. From it flows eternal life, not by preserving fallen humanity, but by renewing it. Christ does not simply reopen the gates of Eden; He recreates humanity itself.

Through the Cross, the corruption introduced by Adam is healed. Through the Cross, immortality is restored, not as endless fallen existence, but as glorified life in communion with God.

Renewal Before Immortality

The guarding of the Tree of Life by cherubim and a flaming sword teaches an essential theological truth: eternal life cannot be granted apart from transformation. Humanity must first be renewed before it can live forever. This renewal takes place through Christ's death and resurrection.

The Cross, therefore, is not merely the means by which sins are forgiven; it is the instrument through which human nature itself is healed. Only after passing through death with Christ can humanity receive life with Christ.

In the New Testament, this truth is made explicit. Access to life is restored not by returning to Eden, but by union with Christ:

“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life.”

(John 3:36, NKJV)

Thus, the Tree of Life that was once guarded now stands open to all—not in a garden, but in the Church; not as a fruit taken by the hand, but as a life received through the Cross and sealed in the resurrection.

The Cross is the Tree of Life made visible in history, the fulfillment of what Eden promised and what humanity lost.

Noah’s Ark and the Wood of Salvation

The Fathers of the Church consistently recognized Noah’s Ark as a type of the Cross and of the salvation accomplished through Christ. Just as the ark was constructed of wood and bore humanity safely through the waters of judgment, so the Cross, also made of wood, bears humanity through death into life.

Salvation Through the Wood

The flood was not merely a natural disaster; it was a divine judgment upon a world corrupted by sin. Yet within that judgment, God prepared mercy. The ark did not remove the flood, but it carried the faithful through it. In the same way, the Cross does not eliminate death immediately, but it transforms death into the passage to life.

Those who entered the ark were saved not because of their strength or wisdom, but because they trusted God’s word and entered the place He had prepared. Likewise, salvation in Christ is not achieved by human effort, but by entering into the life, death, and resurrection of the One whom God has provided.

Covenant and Preservation of Life

God’s covenant with Noah reveals another essential aspect of salvation. The ark was not for Noah alone, but for his household and for all living creatures. Salvation was communal and cosmic in scope. This anticipates the work of Christ, whose salvation extends not only to individuals, but to the renewal of all creation.

The pitch that covered the ark inside and out sealed it against the waters of destruction. The Fathers often see in this a figure of Christ’s blood, which covers and protects those who belong to Him. Just as the ark floated above the waters of judgment, so those who are united to Christ are carried through death into resurrection.

The Ark as a Type of the Church

The Church herself is often identified as the ark of salvation. Within her, humanity is preserved from the flood of sin and death, not by isolation from the world, but by faithful obedience to God's saving plan. As there was one ark and one door, so there is one Christ, one faith, and one baptism.

Noah's Ark thus proclaims a central truth of salvation history: God saves through obedience, through covenant, and through the wood He has chosen. The ark of wood prepares the way for the Cross of wood, through which God brings salvation not from water alone, but from death itself.

Isaac, the Beloved Son, and the Sacrifice Foretold

The offering of Isaac is one of the clearest prophetic patterns of the salvation plan. Abraham is commanded to offer his beloved son, and Isaac obeys without resistance. The scene is marked by details that resonate deeply with the Gospel.

Isaac was not merely Abraham's son; he was his only beloved son, the child of promise through whom God had vowed to bless the nations. Yet God commanded Abraham to offer this very son as a sacrifice.

“So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ Then he said, ‘Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ And Abraham said, ‘My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.’ So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.”

(Genesis 22:6–10, NKJV)

The Father Who Offers and the Son Who Obeys

In this account, Abraham acts as a figure of God the Father. He does not offer a stranger or a servant, but his own beloved son. His obedience is voluntary, costly, and complete. This anticipates the Father's offering of His only begotten Son for the life of the world.

Isaac, for his part, is not portrayed as a helpless child. He carries the wood upon his own shoulders, ascends the mountain willingly, and submits to his father without resistance. His obedience prefigures the obedience of Christ, who carried His Cross and offered Himself freely:

“He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

(Philippians 2:8, NKJV)

“God Will Provide for Himself the Lamb”

Isaac's question—“Where is the lamb?”—is among the most significant in all of Scripture. Abraham's reply, “God will provide for Himself the lamb,” is not only a statement of faith but a prophecy. On

Mount Moriah, God indeed provided a ram to take Isaac's place. Yet this provision pointed forward to a greater fulfillment.

In Christ, God provides not a substitute animal, but His own Son as the true Lamb. Isaac is spared; Christ is not. What was withheld from Abraham is fulfilled by God Himself.

From Moriah to Golgotha

The location of Isaac's offering is traditionally associated with the region that would later become Jerusalem. Thus, the sacrifice of Isaac prophetically anticipates the sacrifice of Christ in both meaning and place. Isaac's release from death foreshadows resurrection, just as Christ's resurrection follows His true sacrifice.

The Epistle to the Hebrews reflects on Abraham's faith in this event:

“Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.”

(Hebrews 11:19, NKJV)

The story of Isaac reveals that the Cross was not an unexpected interruption in God's plan, but its intended fulfillment. The Father offers, the Son obeys, and God provides salvation—not by sparing Himself, but by giving Himself.

The Rod of Aaron: Life from What Is Dead

Aaron's rod appears repeatedly as a sign of divine authority, victory over evil, and life from death.

“the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Show a miracle for yourselves,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.’ ” So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the Lord commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.”

(Exodus 7:8–12, NKJV)

The rod triumphs not by imitation, but by swallowing the counterfeit. This becomes an image of the Cross: not merely matching evil, but overcoming it.

Later, God confirms Aaron's priesthood through the miracle of life springing from what is dead:

“ Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the Lord said to Moses, “Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a

sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die.”
(Numbers 17:8–10, NKJV)

A dead staff blossoms. This is a sign of resurrection life. It teaches that God’s chosen priesthood is not based on human ambition but divine appointment—and it anticipates the true Priest whose death becomes life for the world.

The Rod of Moses

The rod of Aaron is another powerful Old Testament sign that points directly to the mystery of the Cross. In multiple moments of Israel’s history, this simple wooden staff becomes an instrument through which God reveals His authority, His chosen priesthood, and His power to bring life out of death.

The Rod That Swallowed the Serpents

When Pharaoh demanded a sign, God instructed Moses and Aaron to demonstrate His power before the ruler of Egypt.

“The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, “Show a miracle for yourselves,” then you shall say to Aaron, “Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.”’ So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the LORD commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.”

(Exodus 7:8–12, NKJV)

Here, the rod becomes a sign of divine authority. Although the Egyptian magicians imitate the miracle, their power is ultimately overcome. Aaron’s rod consumes the others, revealing that God’s power does not merely compete with false powers—it triumphs over them.

The Fathers saw in this event a figure of the Cross, which would appear weak in the eyes of the world, yet would ultimately swallow up sin, death, and the dominion of the enemy.

The Rod That Blossomed

Later, during the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, the Israelites questioned Aaron’s priesthood. God answered not with argument, but with a sign of life.

“Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the LORD to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Bring Aaron’s rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a

sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die.”
(Numbers 17:8–10, NKJV)

A dry, lifeless staff—cut off from root and soil—suddenly produces buds, blossoms, and fruit. Life emerges where life is naturally impossible. This miracle confirms Aaron’s priesthood, but it also reveals a deeper truth: God brings life out of death.

The Cross and the True Priesthood

The rod of Aaron prefigures Christ in two profound ways. First, it points to Christ as the true and eternal High Priest, chosen not by human appointment but by divine will. Second, it reveals that life flows from what appears dead.

The Cross, like Aaron’s rod, is made of wood. It appears lifeless, cursed, and powerless. Yet from it flows resurrection, forgiveness, and eternal life. As Aaron’s rod was placed before the Testimony as a sign, so the Cross stands at the center of the Church as the sign of Christ’s priesthood and victory.

What the rod accomplished temporarily, the Cross accomplishes eternally. From death comes life; from obedience comes glory; from the wood comes salvation.

The Rod That Opened the Sea

At the edge of the Red Sea, Israel stood trapped between the waters and the pursuing Egyptian army. Deliverance appeared impossible. Yet God commanded Moses to lift up his rod.

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward. But lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea. And I indeed will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall follow them. So I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, his chariots, and his horsemen. Then the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained honor for Myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.’”

(Exodus 14:15–18, NKJV)

The raised rod opens a path where none existed. Israel passes through the waters unharmed, while the forces of death are destroyed behind them. The Church has always seen in this event an image of baptism and of the Cross. Through the Cross, Christ opens a passage through death itself, allowing His people to pass from slavery to freedom, from death to life.

The Rod That Struck the Rock

Later, in the wilderness, the people again faced death—this time from thirst. Once more, God commanded Moses to act through the rod.

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock,

and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.’ And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.”
(*Exodus 17:5–6, NKJV*)

From a struck rock flows living water, sustaining the people in the desert. The Apostle Paul makes the meaning of this sign explicit:

“For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”
(*1 Corinthians 10:4, NKJV*)

The striking of the rock points directly to Christ struck upon the Cross, from whose side flowed blood and water. What Moses accomplished in figure, Christ fulfills in reality.

The Cross as the True Rod of Power

The rod of Moses reveals a consistent pattern: God saves not through human strength, but through obedience to His command. The rod itself has no power apart from God’s will. In the same way, the Cross appears powerless in the eyes of the world, yet it becomes the instrument through which God defeats sin and death.

Through the rod, the sea is opened. Through the Cross, the grave is opened. Through the rod, water flows from the rock. Through the Cross, the Spirit is poured out upon the world.

Thus, the rod of Moses prepares us to understand the Cross not as an object of shame, but as the means by which God reveals His glory and grants life to His people.

In the Wilderness: Healing, Victory, and the Cross Lifted Up

As Israel journeyed through the wilderness, God continued to reveal His plan of salvation through concrete events that carried deep symbolic meaning. These moments were not random acts of provision; they were signs that taught Israel—and later the Church—how salvation would come through suffering transformed by obedience and faith. Again and again, wood, elevation, and divine intervention appear, preparing the people to recognize the mystery of the Cross.

Bitter Waters Made Sweet

Soon after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites found themselves without water. When they finally reached water at Marah, it was bitter and undrinkable. The people complained, and Moses cried out to the Lord.

“So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’ So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree. When he

cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.”
(*Exodus 15:22–25, NKJV*)

The Fathers saw in this event a clear figure of the Cross. The bitter waters represent the fallen condition of the world and the bitterness of life under sin. The tree, cast into the waters, transforms what is undrinkable into a source of life. In the same way, the Cross transforms suffering, death, and corruption into healing and salvation. What is bitter is not removed, but changed.

Victory Through Uplifted Hands

Another striking image appears in Israel’s battle against Amalek. Joshua fought on the battlefield, while Moses ascended a hill to pray.

“Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.’ So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.”
(*Exodus 17:8–13, NKJV*)

Moses, standing with uplifted arms, forms the shape of the Cross. Israel’s victory does not depend merely on military strength, but on intercession and endurance. When the hands remain lifted, victory is assured; when they fall, defeat follows. This foreshadows Christ lifted up on the Cross, whose outstretched arms bring victory over the enemy. The support of Aaron and Hur reveals the communal nature of salvation—victory is sustained through shared faith and perseverance.

The Bronze Serpent Lifted Up

Perhaps the most explicit Old Testament image of the Cross is the bronze serpent.

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”
(*Numbers 21:8–9, NKJV*)

The people were dying from the venom of serpents, the very image of sin and death. God did not remove the serpents immediately, but He provided a means of healing. The serpent lifted up on a pole becomes the instrument of life. Those who look upon it in faith are healed.

Christ Himself directly identifies this event with His crucifixion:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
(John 3:14–15, NKJV)

The Cross becomes the place where sin is exposed and defeated. Death is not ignored; it is confronted and overcome.

The Cross Revealed Through the Journey

In the wilderness, Israel learns that salvation comes not by avoiding suffering, but by trusting God within it. Bitter waters are healed by a tree. Victory is secured by uplifted hands. Death is overcome by looking upon what is lifted up. Each sign prepares the people to understand the Cross—not as a scandal, but as God’s chosen means of healing and life.

The Cross Foretold from the Beginning

The Old Testament is filled with signs, images, and events that quietly but consistently point toward the Holy Cross. These are not isolated coincidences, nor later interpretations imposed upon the text. Rather, they reveal that the Cross was woven into God’s plan of salvation from the very beginning, long before it was revealed openly in history.

From Eden onward, salvation is repeatedly shown to come through wood, obedience, sacrifice, and divine intervention. Humanity falls through a tree, and humanity is restored through a tree. Death enters through disobedience, and life is restored through obedience. What is lost through grasping is regained through self-giving love.

Prophetic Actions of the Prophets

Even the actions of the prophets themselves bear the imprint of the Cross. Elijah and Elisha both raised dead children by stretching themselves upon them, body to body, in a manner the Fathers recognized as forming the sign of the Cross. Life is restored not by words alone, but through bodily self-giving and intercession.

These acts foreshadow the One who would stretch Himself upon the wood of the Cross to restore life to the dead—not temporarily, but eternally.

The Cross as God’s Chosen Means

Throughout the Old Testament, God repeatedly teaches His people that salvation does not come through power, strength, or human wisdom. It comes through trust, obedience, and what appears weak in the eyes of the world. A staff defeats armies. A tree heals bitter waters. A lifted serpent heals the dying. A wooden ark saves from judgment. A beloved son carries wood to his own offering.

Each of these prepares the people of God to recognize Christ crucified—not as a failure, but as the fulfillment of everything God had been revealing all along.

Fulfillment in Christ

When Christ is finally lifted up on the Cross, all these signs converge. The wood, the lifting up, the blood, the obedience, and the victory over death are no longer symbols but realities. What was once hidden in type is now revealed in truth.

The Cross is therefore not an interruption in salvation history but its center. It is the key by which Scripture is unlocked, the point at which prophecy becomes fulfillment, and the means through which God reconciles the world to Himself.

As the Church proclaims, the Cross is at once suffering and glory, judgment and mercy, death and life. What God revealed in shadows through the Old Testament, He has now revealed fully in His Son.

In beholding the Cross, we behold the wisdom of God—foretold from the beginning, revealed in Christ, and offered to the world for the salvation of all.



Review Questions

1. Why did God kick Adam & Eve out of Paradise? (so they won't eat from the tree of life)
2. What type of wood was Noah's ark made out of? (Gopherwood)
3. What did Isaac carry up the mountain? (The wood for the offering)
4. Who's rod turned into a serpent? (Aaron's Rod)
5. Other than flowers, what else did Aaron's rod grow? (Almond buds)
6. What did God tell Moses to do to split the red sea? (strike the water with his rod)
7. What was the name of the place where the Israelites encountered bitter water? (Marah)
8. What did Moses do to turn the bitter water sweet? (He casted the tree that God showed him into the water)
9. Who supported Moses's hands until they beat the Amalekites? (Aaron & Hur)
10. What symbol did Moses make and from what material, so that those bitten would be healed? (Bronze Serpent)