

“His Cross” and “The Cross”

The year 1707 saw the publication of that moving hymn penned by Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” It invites us to ponder the boundless panorama of Calvary, and the cross on which the Prince of Glory died. And, when we do, we see an unfolding glory concerning Christ, *prophetically, typically, historically, dispensationally and devotionally*. Let us consider something of those glories in the expressions “His Cross” and “the Cross.”

“His Cross”

“And He bearing His cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha” (Jn 19:17). The expression “His cross” speaks of ownership. What did our Lord own in His earthly sojourn? By His own admission He possessed nothing of value – not even that which the poorest among men and lowly creatures could boast. “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt 8:20). There was, however, something He did own that could never be possessed by the richest of men in any age— His cross! This He owned and it belonged to Him and to Him alone.

Our Lord took ownership of His cross in the triune counsels of eternity past. He was there the Lamb slain, ordained from the foundation of the world. “Here am I, send me,” the Man of sorrows destined to become acquainted with grief! His cross is owned by Him in His divine right in sonship, “for it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell.” He and He alone as the Son of God and perfect Man, owned all that is associated with His cross. He owned the suffering associated with it and He owned the glory of it that should follow. On that dusty road to Golgotha, we see the beginning of the fulfilment of those eternal counsels. It was in part typified in Isaac. We see him along the upward path to Mount Moriah in loving obedience to his father, bent under the wood for the altar on which he was to be sacrificed. Of His own death the Son of God well knew; but not so Isaac, the son of Abraham. There was a substitute for Isaac on the altar at Moriah; but there could never be a substitute for the Son of God on the altar at Calvary. See then, on that road to Calvary, our Beloved Saviour, Shepherd and Friend, bowed low under the weight of that roughly hewn Roman gibbet, which would carry His sinless body into death. What supreme righteousness and sublime love led Him to fulfil the joy that was set before Him!

We have our Lord’s ownership of His cross mentioned again in Colossians 1:20 where it is doubly conveyed. “And, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself; by Him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.” Ownership entails the right of *appropriation*. Here appropriation is in connection with His shed blood and the blessing of *reconciliation*. Peace has been appropriated by His cross, and the believer enters its blessing of reconciliation in grace before a holy and righteous God. All else will be appropriated unto Him by virtue of His cross in a future day. It will be done in judgment, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

We read of “His cross” again in this epistle. “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross” (Col 2:14). Ownership also carries the right of *administration*. Heathen hammers drove the nails into the Son of God at Calvary; but on Calvary’s hill there was a work by the finger of God, again according to His eternal counsels, as there was in the law given on Sinai’s mount (Deut 4:13). Christ laid the foundation for the new by taking the law out of the way [forever], nailing it to His cross” (Col 2:14). The Authorized Version carries the true and triumphant sense. It is “His cross,” and so we have the emphatic active voice – *He* – “nailing it to His cross.” The nailing was of His own imperative undertaking, irrespective of the human hands that placed Him on the Roman gibbet. He was the willing sacrifice. The Son of God nailed the old economy to His cross, making way for the new, even the New Covenant which is in His shed blood. In this He is “A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man” (Heb 8:2).

Associated with His ownership of His cross and right of administration, we have the blessed bestowal of imputed righteousness as well as our justification and our glorification. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21). “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom 4:8). “Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom 8:30).

“The Cross”

In the Gospels, “the cross” is used in a *physical* sense – referring to the **means** of Christ’s death – His crucifixion. This same term is found in the Epistles where it is used in a *doctrinal* sense, relating to the **meaning** of His death. Every facet of our faith is founded upon “the cross.”

The cross in selected passages of Scripture

In the passages below the Spirit of God has seen fit to use “the cross” perhaps where we would expect to find the name of the One who bore it. He wants us to focus not just upon the Person of Christ (a glorious subject though that is), but also on what was accomplished in His death on the cross. It is “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The doctrine of the cross is firstly “God-ward,” seen in the need for a sinless propitiating *sacrifice* for sin. Second, it is “man-ward,” seen in the need for a sinless *substitute* because of man’s sin.

1 Corinthians 1:17–18: The cross and the simplicity and sublimity of salvation

“For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel. not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

It is not the preaching of the “throne” that is foolishness to the world. Few would be disturbed by the notion of a sovereign man in heaven. Nor is it preaching “Christ” that is foolishness to the world. Quite the contrary! The higher critic and philosopher Strauss declared, “Whatever is taken away by rational criticism, Christ is still left.” Other humanists admit that Christ occupies the highest place in perfecting man’s moral conscience. When in their company we have perfect liberty to preach Christ as a man of supreme virtue. But place Him upon a felon’s cross as the sacrifice for sin at the hand of a righteous God, and man’s responsibility in the light of it, we will soon incur their revulsion. Paul noted it. “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.”

The preaching of the cross is foolishness to the world because it brings together vital truths which confound the natural mind. For example, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility as revealed in scripture, are reckoned to be incompatible; as is Christ’s unceasing deity and His real humanity. God’s infinite purity and man’s inherited iniquity are also at odds with the rational mind. It is because the natural mind has not been educated by the truth of “the cross” in faith. So what does the natural mind do in these and like instances? It either dismisses the truth of the cross altogether, or it reverts to human wisdom, siding with one aspect of it to the exclusion or lessening of others. This is why “the cross” is brought out early in Paul’s corrective ministry to the carnal Corinthians. They were priding themselves in the wisdom of the natural man and had lost sight of the sublime truth of salvation and life through the cross. Like Israel between Elim and the wilderness (Num 33:9-11), they needed to revisit their redemption in heartfelt self-examination; to see afresh the work of Christ as the sinless sacrifice and substitute on the cross.

Galatians 6:11-12: The cross and our place of separation and persecution

“And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased. As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.”

Circumcision represents all that is Judaism, every shade of it, past and present, even the vain rites of the world’s religion where spirituality is measured by efforts to improve the flesh. The cross of Christ has done away with it all. We are to be outside the camp. It is now the circumcision of the heart and not of the flesh. “The cross” and “the camp” are incompatible. If Paul had compromised on the matter of circumcision, then he would have been well accepted. The “offense of the cross” would have ceased. This is the way of the religions of today. They seek acceptability with society by avoiding the cross, lest it cause offense.

The thought continues in verse 12. The persecution here is physical and is the result of standing outside the camp. That is where the cross and its doctrine will be found. It is there that we bear His reproach (Heb 13:13). Separation brings physical persecution. The historical record stained red with the blood of martyrs bears solemn witness to it. The Lord Himself acknowledges it in His letter to

Smyrna – the suffering church. “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev 2:10).

Galatians 6:14: The cross as the reason for **glorifying** and **sanctification**

“But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

The Galatians had slipped doctrinally and were glorying in the beggarly elements of the Law. Much was made of the rite of circumcision as a sign of spirituality. The cross-work of Christ put an end to the OT rite of circumcision. To preach the cross-work of Christ is to bring enmity from those who support it and all that it stands for. It is no longer the circumcision of the flesh but of the heart as noted above. They were to glory not in the deeds of the law, but in the cross. There they will find reason for a sanctified life as they consider again Christ as their sacrifice and substitute. “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight” (Rom 3:20).

Ephesians 2:14–16: The cross as the ground of **reconciliation**

“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”

It is reconciliation *by* (through) the cross. The cross-work of Christ put away sin as well as the need for “the law of commandments contained in ordinances.” It “made in Himself [Christ] of twain one new man, so making peace.” The body of Christ – the One New Man came into being at Pentecost on the ground of the Lord’s sacrificial work on the cross. The reconciling work of the cross brings the saved Jew and saved Gentile onto the same ground, ground that neither previously had.

Philippians 2:8: The cross as the depth of the Lord’s **suffering** and **subjection**

“And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

It is “even the death *of* the cross,” not “even the death *on* the cross,” which would refer to the unspeakable physical agony and ignominy of His crucifixion. Here the cross brings out the willing, just and holy One under divine judgment for sin and for righteousness. The expression “even the death of the cross” evinces an inexpressible dimension to the subjection of Christ. Isaiah chapter 53 foretold it. “The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Gethsemane’s garden anticipated it.

“And He went a little further, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt 26:39). Peter acknowledges it in his first Epistle. “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18).

The focus here is upon the willing cross-work of Christ – His sacrifice as one who knew no sin, but was made sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. The writer to the Hebrews celebrates it. “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (Heb 2:9).

Philippians 3:18: The cross as the object of doctrinal opposition

“For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ.”

It is not physical persecution here, although that may well be associated with it. It is doctrinal error which cast its ministers as enemies of the cross. Emphasis is placed on the denials regarding the *cross-work* of Christ by false teachers, and so they are referred to as “enemies of the cross” rather than “enemies of Christ.” It includes those who teach such things as “limited atonement,” the “falling away doctrine” and “unconditional election.” The value, virtue and victory of the shed blood on the cross is diminished and even denied. It may seem harsh to say, but all who claim good works and the keeping of the law as a means to salvation in any way, are in fact adversaries of the cross. It is as Paul declared to the erring Galatians. “I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Gal 2:21). The cross becomes a mere historical event and the symbol of a martyr, rather than a testament to a divine Mediator, whose work of salvation is a finished work, in the light of which our boasting is excluded and pride abased.

Hebrews 12:2: The cross as the reason for Christ’s exaltation.

“Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Our Lord endured the cross because of the joy set before Him. He suffered at the hand of God when He bore God’s judgment against sin; and also at the hands of men who placed Him on a felon’s cross. What defined that joy? It was the sacred joy of vindicating a thrice holy God whose holiness had been slighted by sin and, in so doing enabling God to justify the sinner by faith without contradicting His divine righteousness. “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (Jn 12:24). “For it became him, for whom are

all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings" (Heb 2:10).

John 19:25: The cross and our identification

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene."

Those mentioned here were among His beloved. Though few in number and surrounded by the vulgar hoard, they drew near to "the cross" of their Beloved, and identified with His suffering and humiliation. May God grant us courage to do the same and pray that He will keep us in fervent desire to do likewise – even on that resurrection morn, the first day of the week. "This do in remembrance of me, till I come."

In the light of the ineffable glories of the cross, it is little wonder, that through his apostate church Satan seeks to replace "the cross" with an ecumenical totem pole, engraved and festooned with the symbols of man's empty religion. Let us be true to the "old rugged cross," the emblem of suffering and shame. And love that old cross, where the Dearest and Best for a world of lost sinners was slain.