

When I Survey The Wondrous Cross

Introduction. Michael Bird, a New Testament scholar from Australia, tells about a well-known American preacher who gave some advice to an Australian congregation. He said, “Don’t tell people about the cross, it doesn’t work. That’s why the Franklin Graham crusades are no longer effective. Just tell them that God loves them and has a plan for them.” The crux of his advice was that “The message of a crucified Jew is ridiculous to the modern mind ... So move on to something better. A crucified Messiah is stupid, but promise them prosperity, give them emotional experiences, provide them with self-esteem — then you’ll fill the pews.”

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the most eminent English hymn writer in history, wrote a beautiful hymn, “When I Survey The Wondrous Cross,” and two of the verses will sufficiently introduce our remarks today.

When I survey the history of the physical cross, I see two pieces of wood so attached to each other as to support the full weight of a living human body with outstretched arms attached by iron spikes driven through the hands and feet of that body. I see an instrument of death much more cruel to its victims than sword or burning at the stake because its pain continued so much longer.

Crucifixion is not a pretty picture. Crucifixion was a disgraceful, detestable, and despicable way to die. It was a death reserved for common criminals: murderers, rapists, robbers, and insurrectionists. Too often we survey the cross from a more sanitized view. From jewelry to paintings and pictures in people's homes — to images on pulpits, communion tables, and church buildings. But don’t forget the cross was a vile, vicious, and barbaric death. Historians tell us that the cross was used by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Egyptians, especially in times of war, prior to its usage by the Romans. Probably even before the time of Christ the dread of this instrument of death symbolized the cares and burdens of life.

When I survey the wondrous cross, there are several elements that need to be brought to our attention so that we can be special followers of Jesus Christ.

I. The Cross And Government

- A. When I survey the wondrous cross, I can understand the appeal of the gospel to the Jewish masses who saw and heard the basic facts and truths preached by the apostles on and after the Pentecost of Acts 2.
 1. When Pilate asked, "What shall I do with Jesus?" (Matthew 27:22) the Jewish answer indicated their deep hatred for Him. Their response, “Let him be crucified" reveals the malice which the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to control Jewish thought, had for Jesus.
 2. Jesus disappointed their hopes for worldly power and prominence which they mistakenly attached to the Messiah’s reign. However, “the common people heard him gladly” (Mark 12:37). Even the Jewish officers admitted, “Never man spake like this man” (John 7:46). Therefore, the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees saw their control of the masses slipping away. The longer Jesus was free to teach the masses in Galilee and Judea, the less faith the officials of Judaism retained with the Jewish nation overall.

- B. The social structures that gave the Jews their national identity were incredibly important to them. But within just a few weeks after Jesus was crucified, thousands of Jews gave up animal sacrifices, the keeping of the law of Moses, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the belief that the Messiah would be a political leader. The fact that an entire community of people were willing to give up treasured beliefs passed down for centuries shows that the Jewish leadership was unsuccessful in turning them from their deep belief in the Son of God.

II. The Cross And Salvation

- A. When I survey the wondrous cross, I see the symbol of God's grace extended to all sinners willing to accept salvation on gospel terms, not on the merits of their own good works, fleshly origin, material worth, or religious inheritance (Romans 5:8-9; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 2:9). May we never grow tired of preaching and considering the marvelous grace of God.
- B. When I survey the wondrous cross, I see the inability of worldly wisdom and human philosophy to bring sinful souls to God (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).
 - 1. The very thought of a Messiah who suffered at all, much less for others, was repugnant to the Jewish mind. That crucifixion would be the means of such suffering was even more ridiculous because crucifixion argued the justice of the guilt charged to the one crucified. Such an attitude, though, completely ignores a prophecy as Isaiah 53.
 - 2. The idea of a crucified hero was a sign of weakness to the Gentile mind. To the Gentile, such a person needed to be defended rather than worshiped.
- C. When I survey the wondrous cross, I discover the secret of the brilliant and honest young Saul and his commitment to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This zealous young man had been so glued to the Pharisaic concept of Judaism that he believed disciples of Jesus should be imprisoned or killed (Acts 8:1). He punished them in the synagogue and tried to make them blaspheme, persecuting them to foreign cities until he met the resurrected Jesus on his Damascus journey (Acts 26:9-20). But afterward, he gave his life to knowing nothing "save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). The grace of God forever changed him (1 Timothy 1:12-15), and the cross of Jesus became his everything (Galatians 6:14). This is true repentance (cp. Matthew 21:28-29).

III. The Cross And Providence

- A. When I survey the wondrous cross, I see something about God's overruling the evil purposes of men to His glory (Acts 2:22-23). Enemies of our Lord saw Jesus as an obstacle in their way of controlling the religious population. The elders, chief priests, and scribes had long managed Jewish thought by their traditions and self-made decrees.
- B. Jesus dismantled their unauthorized religious hypocrisy and immoral lifestyle. Jesus taught simply in parables and word pictures of the nonmilitary nature of the kingdom of God. Then came His teaching to be the Messiah of Old Testament prophets reinforced by His sinless life and confirmation of God's claims to be the Son of God.

- C. God demonstrated that He held sway in the world, and that He could move events so that the truth which could release religious captives from Satan's prison was preached (Galatians 4:4; cp. Genesis 3:15).

IV. The Cross And Hope

- A. When I survey the wondrous cross, I see beyond His death a living hope for myself and all of Adam's children who have fallen by Satan's deception.
 - 1. Jesus came to this world of sin, sickness, sorrow, death, dying, and disappointment to "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).
 - 2. As the darkness of night precedes the dawn of day, so the gloom of the garden grave gave way to the glory of God. "He is not here, but is risen" (Matthew 28:6).
- B. "The way of the cross leads home" because the way of the cross is the way to glory, the way to God. Without the cross there is no crown; without the grave there is no glory.
 - 1. A criminal rarely surrenders himself so he can be executed. They run from the consequences of their iniquity. They are hunted, caught, and captured. And their punishment is appropriate and deserved.
 - 2. But Jesus was innocent. He was a willing, voluntary sacrifice (John 10:18). He was a perfect sacrifice for the world's sins (Hebrews 10:4, 10; 1 Peter 2:22-24).
- C. By His resurrection He validated the fact of life beyond death. That He showed Himself alive is confirmed by the living witnesses who gave their lives to verify their personal testimony regarding what their eyes saw and their ears heard.
 - 1. Charles Colson served as Special Counsel to President Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1970. In 1974, he served seven months in federal prison as the first member of the Nixon administration to be incarcerated for Watergate-related charges. He became a Bible believer in 1973 and authored more than 30 books before his death in 2012.
 - 2. He wrote, "I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."
 - 3. In a world often filled with discouragement and despair, we can discover the better, blessed, and living hope of the gospel that is rooted in the resurrection of Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

V. The Cross And Commitment

- A. When I survey the wondrous cross, I can reach His shed blood in my burial in baptism, and from that grave I came forth to walk in a newness of life (Romans 6:1-4). Thank God for the cross by which He enables sinners to become saints — to be wearers of the crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8), the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4), and the crown of life (James 1:12; Revelation 2:10).

- B. But that crown does not come without commitment. The cross is an abiding symbol of my personal responsibility as a disciple of Jesus. Many months before He was nailed to the cross the Lord said, "He that doth not take his cross and follow after me, is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38).
- C. In a similar vein, when Jesus had told His apostles about His impending death and resurrection at Jerusalem, and was rebuked by Peter for talking about such, He called Peter "Satan" and a "offense" to the fulfilling of His earthly mission (Matthew 16:23). Then, turning to His disciples, He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (v. 24). This is our Lord's challenge to be followed now, and we cannot be an "offense" to it by the way I chose to live (Titus 2:7-10).

Conclusion. The greatest barrier between me and complete submission to the cross of Christ is myself — my own self-centered desires which Satan uses to draw me away from the control of Christ. Jesus said of His Father, "I do always the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29), and this is the challenge of the wondrous cross. There is no crown of glory apart from the cross of duty — everywhere and every moment of this life. This is complete commitment!

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