

When I Survey The Wondrous Cross

1 Corinthians 1:17-24

What do you think about when you see a cross? What does the Cross of Christ mean to you? Here in the twenty-first century we may have lost the majority of the horror which was associated with the cross in the first century. To us as Christians, the Cross is a beautiful thing, but to the first followers of Christ, the Cross was anything but beautiful.

The cross was associated with clotted blood and pools of fresh blood and sweat and tears of excruciating agony and death and rotting flesh. In fact, many scholars believe that the hill where Jesus was crucified was called “the place of a skull,” not because the hill was shaped like a skull, but because when the dead bodies of the crucified were taken down from their crosses, the corpses were just thrown down to the foot of the hill. When the animals and birds were finished with them, the sunshine did its work of bleaching out the bones and skulls which lay scattered there.

That’s what early Christians thought about when they saw a cross. We may reclaim some of the impact here in our day if we substituted an electric chair for the cross: they have both been used to execute criminals. Wouldn’t it seem strange to see church steeples with electric chairs on top of them?

In our day, the cross has become a thing of beauty. It has become the symbol of Christianity. People wear it on chains around their necks. The shape of the cross has been incorporated into the design of some great churches and cathedrals. There is an ancient legend which says that a carpenter’s guild wished to honor another carpenter whose name was Jesus. To honor Him they decided among themselves that every door they would build from then on would have incorporated into its design the shape of a cross. And the legend contends that that is why, even today, we are able to look at many doors and see a cross at just about eye level.

Sometimes the cross is used as a decoration. I remember a few years ago just before Christmas seeing a cross on the front steps of a church, and the cross was decorated with tinsel and garland, as if it were a Christmas tree. Possibly what that congregation was trying to say was this: “Your regular Christmas trees are pretty, but to us as Christians, there is another tree which is much more beautiful, and has much more meaning.”

But what do *you* think about when you see a cross? Your first thoughts may be nothing at all: you may not think of anything in particular when you see a cross. Your first thoughts may be of church, or religion, or of something boring. If you were pressed to give a better answer than that, you may say that you think of Jesus' death on the cross, or some other trite answer that you've heard somewhere.

It is a shame that the cross upon which Jesus died should be held in such low regard by the very people who profess to cling to it.

The Cross of Christ was extremely important to Paul. He lived it, preached it, wrote about it, gloried in it. But he realized that not all people shared the same feelings and convictions about the Cross as he did. Paul looked at the Jews, and he saw that to them the Cross was a stumbling block. Paul looked at the Greeks, and saw that to them the Cross was foolishness, silliness, a scandal.

But then Paul turned his eyes to those who had made Christ their Lord, and he saw that to them the Cross of Christ was the power of God and the wisdom of God. You see, the Cross of Christ does not mean the same things to all people. Some people are offended by a cross. In October 2006 the president of William and Mary College in Virginia ordered that the 100-year-old, 2-foot high brass cross that had stood on the altar of the chapel be removed in order to make the chapel "more welcoming" to everyone. It has since been returned.

Just a few years ago, Palm Bay High School in Brevard County, Florida, was planning to have its graduation ceremonies at Calvary Chapel in Melbourne. One of the graduating seniors, along with her father and one other parent, argued that holding the public school graduation ceremony in the church facility represented "an intolerable and unconstitutional establishment of religion." Why? Because behind the pulpit on the wall is a cross as part of the church's architectural detail. The court ruled that there wasn't enough time for the schools to find another location for the graduation, and that it would be held as planned.

So why not just cover up the cross? Spokesperson Melody Glover told the Associated Press that the church was glad to allow the schools to use its facility, but it would not hide its identity. "It's part of who we are," she said. Good for them! We should never apologize for being who we are.

That was Paul's point here in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1. Some people were offended by the Cross of Christ then, and the same is true in our day.

In 1707 Isaac Watts looked at the Cross and thought about what the Cross meant to him. And he wrote reverent words which were set to music more than a century later. It has become a favorite hymn among the people of God:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

Isaac Watts looked at the Cross of Christ and remembered that **there** is where Jesus **died**:

*See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

And there was only one response that Isaac Watts could make when he surveyed the wondrous Cross:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!*

The Cross means different things to different people. What does it mean to you? What do **you** think about when you survey the wondrous Cross?

From the Scriptures, and from the rich heritage left us by the hymn-writers through the ages, there are several suggestions I'd like to make as to what we should be reminded of every time we see a cross.

1 There is Power in the Blood

There are many kinds of power in the world today: military power, economic power, political power, nuclear power. Iceland has seen some volcanic activity in recent days, as one particular volcano recently forced about 500 people from their homes. There has been speculation that this volcanic activity could cause a larger volcano nearby to erupt, and if that happens, experts say, there could be massive flooding as icecaps melt. In our own country, we can think back to Mt. St. Helens, which erupted thirty years ago. Scientists estimate the

power of the main explosion to have been equal to **50 million tons of dynamite!** The blast leveled 150 square miles of trees and threw 1.3 billion cubic yards of ash and rock into the air. That's power! But no one has ever devised the kind of power such as is available to us through the blood of Jesus Christ.

This should be our first thought when we survey the wondrous Cross: There is Power in the Blood! The Cross is beautiful to us today because the Cross is where Jesus paid for our sins with His own blood! The Cross is precious to us because that is where Jesus made it possible for us to have forgiveness of sins and a restored fellowship with God. Paul wrote in Colossians 1:14 that we have “*redemption, the forgiveness of sins*” through Jesus, that God sent His Son to reconcile to Himself “*all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross*” (v. 20).

The Cross is wondrous to us today because the Cross is where Christ made **real** power available to us. There really is power in the blood, because the Cross has become a symbol of victory, not defeat! There really is power in the blood! There is the power to free us from the burden of our sins and the power which enables us to live a new life. There is the power which enables us to love those who hate us, to face life and death with a new, unique hope and peace. There is the power which gives us victory over personal sin, over passion, over pride. There is the power of the blood of Jesus which cleanses us and qualifies us to serve Him as children of the Most High God—that's real power!

*What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
Oh! Precious is the flow That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know: Nothing but the blood of Jesus!*

And every time we see the Cross, one of our first thoughts should be that there is real power in the blood of Jesus. On the Cross is where that blood was shed—not on a rose thorn or from a torn hangnail! There is power in the blood of Jesus, shed on the Cross!

2 The Way of the Cross Leads Home
Whenever you and I “survey the wondrous Cross” there's something else we should be reminded of: the way of the Cross leads home.

I believe that one of the reasons the Bible refers to us humans as “*the sheep of His pasture*” is because we, like sheep, are so prone to wander away. “*All we like*

sheep have gone astray,” Isaiah said, and he said it with good reason. Even the most self-assured, independent person at one time or another has felt that unmistakable sense of loneliness which comes when we’ve wandered too far away from God.

Some of us wander in that darkness for a long time before we finally turn our eyes to the Cross, and to what Jesus did for us there. But the way of the Cross leads home to the Father, and we, like prodigal children, can only come home to the Father when we kneel at the foot of the Cross in confession of sins. And oh! How sweet it is to know “as we onward go, The Way of the Cross Leads Home.”

And when we survey the wondrous Cross you and I would do well to remember that there is no other way that leads home to the Father *except* for the way of the Cross of Christ. We are aware of the fact that the way of the Cross is a blood-sprinkled way, that it is a way of submission and death to the world. And that’s why we are so eager to *avoid* the way of the Cross. That’s why so many people have tried and are trying right now to sneak into the Kingdom of Heaven by another way. Then comes the day when they are abruptly shown what they’ve heard all their lives—there is no other way! And the truth of the hymn shines brightly:

*I must needs go home by the way of the cross
There’s no other way but this;
I shall ne’er get sight of the gates of light
If the way of the cross I miss.*

And if you are wandering or running away from God, then it’s my prayer that you will never see another cross in your entire lifetime but that you are not reminded that the way of the Cross leads home!

3 **There’s Room At The Cross For You**
Having heard that there’s power in the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross, and that the way of the Cross leads home, how wonderful and comforting it is to know that “*there’s room at the Cross for you.*”

And how wonderful it is to know that no matter how large my sins or my doubts or my confusions loom, there is still room at the Cross for them all. No matter how big a person I consider myself to be, there’s room at the Cross for me. There’s room at the Cross for my fears and my loneliness and my questions. And though Jesus Christ was crucified twenty centuries ago, and though millions of people

have found life and forgiveness and comfort and love and peace at the foot of the Cross—there is still room—here in 2010—for me!

Think about it: there's no way that after sending His Son to die on the Cross, and after loving us *that* much, that God is going to say to any repentant sinner, "I'm sorry, but you see, there just isn't any more room for you here at the Cross." And every time we look at a Cross, we should be reminded that YES! There IS room at the Cross for anyone who repents of his sin and makes Jesus the Lord of his life.

*The hand of my Savior is strong
And the love of my Savior is long;
Thro' sunshine or rain, thro' loss or in gain,
The blood flows from Calv'ry to cleanse every stain.*

*There's room at the cross for you;
There's room at the cross for you!
Tho' millions have come, there's still room for one.
Yes, there's room at the cross for you!*

4 Take Up Thy Cross and Follow Me

This is where many people fall away. Most people will agree that there is power in the blood, that the way of the Cross leads home, and that there's room at the Cross for all who come to Him. But not as many are willing to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. And we don't like to be reminded of this when we see a cross, either. We will allow ourselves to be comforted by what Jesus did on the Cross, but we are not so eager to pick up *our* crosses and carry them every day. We are much more willing to *wear* a cross than we are to *bear* a cross!

We like to hear and read the words of Jesus when He says, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" (Matthew 11:28, NIV), and "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.*" (John 14:1, NIV). But what about when Jesus said "*If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me*" (Matthew 16:24), or "*he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me*" (Matthew 10:38)? What about *those* verses?

My prayer is that you and I will never "survey the wondrous cross" but that we are not reminded that each of us is called upon by God to pick up our own personal

crosses—voluntarily—and bear them! *Must Jesus bear the cross alone, And all the world go free? NO! there's a cross for everyone, And there's a cross for me.*

And it's also my prayer that you and I will never see a cross on a church steeple, on a door, around a person's neck, or anywhere else—even the shape formed by the cross-pieces of a telephone pole—that we are not reminded of the words written by B. B. McKinney in 1936:

*Take up thy cross and follow me,
I heard my Master say;
I gave My life to ransom thee,
Surrender your all today.*

Yes, the cross was a horrible sight to the early Christians, and brought ghastly memories to the surface and shivers down the spine. But the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has transformed that ugly, horrible instrument of death into the most beautiful sight to the eyes of a truly born-again believer.

What about you? Are you willing to be reminded of things like these? It's not an easy path to follow, but are you willing to commit yourself to it?