

SGU PAMPHLETS



The Centrality of the Cross

**by
Samuel Champion**

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‘On either side one, and Jesus in the midst.’

John 19:18.

THE subject of this pamphlet is of supreme importance, for apart from the blessings that come through the ‘wondrous cross’ no one could be saved. Man is a sinner both originally and actually, and as such powerless to save himself. True religion consists in knowing a divine person by divine revelation and illumination. ‘The Spirit of truth,’ says our Lord, ‘shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine and shall shew it unto you.’ (John 16:13,14).

At the place called Calvary three crosses were erected, and nailed to each was a vastly different person: one lost, one sinless, and one saved. To the central one we would direct attention. The designation ‘wondrous’ as descriptive of his cross is truly appropriate from every viewpoint.

I. The Person hanging upon it is unique, peerless, unlike all other persons. He is both divine and human.

John opens his Gospel: ‘In beginning’ (there is no article in the original). What beginning is this? It is the beginning of time.

‘In beginning was the Word.’ The Word was not from, but in, the beginning; therefore He himself had no beginning, which is the same as saying that He is eternal.

‘And the Word was with God,’ indicating a separate personality. The preposition ‘with’ suggests that the Word was both in the presence of

and in communion with God. 'I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was . . . Then I was by him, as one brought up with him, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him.' (Prov 8:23-30). These words tell of the intimacy and fellowship existing between the Word and God before time began. They imply that the Word is personal.

'And the Word was God.' This clearly shows that He is divine. From John's Gospel it is evident that Jesus Christ, the Word, existed in the beginning as an eternal, personal, divine One.

'And the Word was made flesh.' The infinite became finite, the invisible visible, the transcendent immanent. That which was far off drew near. The eternal, personal, divine Word became flesh. He became what He was not previously. He did not cease to be God by becoming man. His deity, though veiled, was never laid aside. His humanity, though sinless, was real, for as incarnate He 'increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.' (Luke 2:52). This is a mystery beyond reason's utmost stretch, but it is apprehended by faith on the ground of revelation. 'And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh.' (I Tim 3:16).

Three great ends were accomplished by the Word becoming incarnate:

(1) It became possible for Him to die. Deity cannot die. But in His humanity the Son of God died and there was a certain separation of His human soul from His human body.

(2) He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities and can truly sympathize with His tempted disciples.

(3) As man He has left us an example that we should follow His steps. (I Pet 2:21). What a person is He who hangs on that central cross, uniting God and man! When He was on earth, some illuminated ones saw God walking the streets, performing mighty works and teaching sublime truth. 'Wondrous' aptly describes the person transfixed to that cross.

II. The Things exhibited at the cross in connection with this peerless person are wondrous:

(1) His sufferings were indescribable. ‘Of his sufferings so intense, Angels have no perfect sense, ‘Tis to God and God alone, That their weight is fully known.’

He suffered throughout His life on earth from the profane as well as from the gracious. He was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,’ and His sufferings culminated at the cross. The pains of His sacred body whilst hanging there were great from the merciless use of the crown of thorns wounding the head, the spear piercing the side, and the nails tearing the hands and feet.

Yet great as were His physical sufferings, those of His soul were greater. Who can estimate the depth of grief in that agonizing cry: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’? He was forsaken in that God was punishing the sins of His people laid on Him.

Human wrath is painful to bear, but almighty wrath is intolerable. Then the pains of hell took hold on Him and He found trouble and sorrow. (Psa 116:3). Divine anger touching imputed sin gave rise to those indescribable pains. David, writing in his name, says: ‘Reproach hath broken my heart , and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none: and for comforters, but I found none.’ (Psa 69:20). ‘Wondrous’ certainly describes His sufferings.

(2) His prayers. Jesus was a man of prayer. The Evangelists represent Him as rising a great while before day to pray (Mark 1:35) and spending whole nights in prayer (Luke 6:12). What a prayer is that recorded in John 17! In Gethsemane He prayed so earnestly that He sweat great drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:44). Viewing His enemies from the cross He prayed: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’ (Luke 23:34). And when all His covenant engagements were complete He cried with a loud voice: ‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’ (verse 46). The ‘loud voice’ of the expiring Redeemer, recorded by three of the Evangelists,

was that of a dying Victor whose spirit was exultant at the immediate prospect of embracing the full fruits of all His travail. Truly His prayers were wondrous.

(3) His blood flowed freely from head, hands, feet and side. The human nature from which the blood issued was absolutely pure and holy. In life He did no sin and knew no sin, but did always the things which pleased the Father. Blood from such an immaculate and sacred source must be precious indeed. ‘Invaluable blood!’ exclaims Joseph Hart. Nothing can be compared to it.

His blood is the sole divinely-accepted remedy for sins. ‘We are not redeemed with corruptible things as silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot.’ (I Pet 1: 18,19). Israel of old found safety under the shed and sprinkled blood. The paschal lamb was slain, and its blood sprinkled on the lintels and side-posts of the houses. The sprinkled blood ensured safety, for, said Jehovah: ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you.’ (Exod 12:13). And the blood of Jesus Christ is still available and still efficacious to faith. In the Spirit’s application to the conscience it still cleanses from all the guilt of sin, making the believing sinner ‘whiter than snow.’ (Isa 1:18).

The blood of Christ also has a voice.

This voice speaks of peace (Eph 2:14), nearness (verse 13) and liberty (Heb 10:19). The blood of Jesus, provided by God, moves God to be favourable to the guilty and it gives the guilty an all-prevailing plea at the throne of grace. Those moments in our pilgrimage journey are indeed sweet and rich in blessing when faith takes her station at the cross and views the blood from the thorn-crowned Saviour cleansing our thoughts, hearts, deeds, words and life. The remedy is as extensive as the disease. The believer is well and soundly taught that ‘from the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in him, but

wounds and bruises and putrefying sores.’ (Isa 1:6). And fully equal to the wounds is the cleansing and all-healing blood which flows from the head to the feet of the crucified Redeemer.

His death differed from all other deaths. It was voluntary. The Evangelists use three distinct words to express the voluntary way in which Jesus yielded up His life. Matthew employs a word which means literally ‘dismissed his spirit’; Mark and Luke both use the same expression signifying ‘breathed it out’; while John’s word means ‘delivered it up.’ Each of these terms indicates a voluntary act which differentiates Christ’s death from all other physical deaths. Said He of His life: ‘No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself.’ (John 10:18). Of all mere creatures, human and brute, it may be predicated: ‘Thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust.’ (Psa 104:29). But not of Christ.

Again, Christ’s death differs from all others in its beneficent effects. Precious indeed are the fruits resulting from Jesus offering Himself without spot to God. (Heb 9:14). His death appeased divine wrath, it silenced the menacing voice of the Law, it removed iniquity, it conquered Satan, it provided access to God, it established the covenant of grace and it ‘opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.’ Our blessed Redeemer ‘humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.’ (Phil 2:8). Truly, His was a wondrous death!

III. The Teaching.

Much salutary spiritual instruction is conveyed by the Holy Spirit to the humble believer as he is prayerfully constrained to contemplate the awesome transactions of Calvary. Standing before the ‘wondrous cross’ with the eye of faith focused upon the peerless person transfixed thereon, the believer sees that:

(1) The death of Christ exhibits the exceeding sinfulness and malignity of sin. He is taught that sin is that polluted thing which is

offensive to holiness. God is essentially holy and as such is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity with complacency; rather He hates it as a loathsome intruder with which He must deal. Sin is the basic cause of all troubles, and it needs the blood of an innocent person to remove it. 'Without shedding of blood there is no remission' - no sending away of sin in its guilt and penalty. This effusion of blood necessitates a chosen victim. 'Christ our passover is sacrificed for us' who are true believers; and they, having been taught somewhat of sin's abominable nature, and feeling in a measure its oppressive burden, can sing with a broken heart:

'We built thy cross on Calvary.'

Sin must be a vile, polluted thing if nothing less than the blood of an innocent, pure, immaculate person can suffice to atone for it.

(2) The justice of God is exhibited in punishing sin. 'The wages of sin is death.' Justice must be satisfied; hence Jesus must suffer, bleed and die. God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for all the sheep, the just for the unjust, that He might bring them to God. 'Many hands were raised to wound him, None would interpose to save, But the awful stroke which found him Was the stroke that justice gave.'

(3) The love of Jesus is revealed in so willingly dying for sinners. No coercion was needed. He delighted to do His Father's will and - amazing thought - 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,' yes, 'when we were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly.' He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.'

(4) The patient endurance of Jesus. The robbers railed, the mob ridiculed, but no murmuring, no invective, no ungracious speech, no unhallowed word fell from the lips of our smarting Surety. All His sufferings were uncomplainingly borne. 'He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. He is brought as a lamb

to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.’ (Isa 53:7). ‘When he was reviled, he reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.’ (I Pet 2:23).

He was fully aware that all human agency in His agony was but instrumental. He knew what the Scriptures say respecting Himself as the stone: ‘I will engrave the graving thereof, and I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.’ (Zech 3:9). And this precious knowledge fixed in His sinless heart moved Him to patient endurance under the tremendous weight of His appointed sufferings. Truly the teachings of the cross are wondrous.

IV. The Power of the cross is seen in:

(1) The salvation of the Church. Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to ‘feed the Church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood.’ (Acts 20:28).

‘One Church there is, it hath no name,
Whatever warring sects proclaim.’

Each member of it is bought with a price and therefore must be saved. The name assigned to Mary’s Son was Jesus, ‘for he shall save his people from their sins,’ (Matt 1:21), from sin’s penalty (I Thess 5:9), from sin’s power (Rom 6:14), and, finally from sin’s presence when they reach their Father’s eternal home. (Rev 21:27).

(2) The pardon of individual sins. ‘If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins’ (I John 1:9), ‘faithful’ to His Word (e.g. Isa 1:18, 55:7), ‘just’ in view of the fact that full payment has been made at Calvary, and
‘Payment God cannot twice demand, First at my bleeding Surety’s hand
And then again at mine.’

(3) The silencing of the Law. In His redeeming love, and by satisfying divine justice, Christ removed all the anathemas of God’s

broken law. 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us.' (Gal 3:13). The handwriting of ordinances that was contrary to us is taken out of the way by Christ nailing it to His cross. (Col 2:14). 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus.' (Rom 8:1).

(4) The conquest of Satan. A crucified Christ wounded the prince of this world and bruised the old serpent's head. Satan, in bruising our Saviour's heel by His death on the cross, received a fatal blow on his own head (Gen 3:15). Through death Jesus destroyed him that had the power of death, i.e. the devil (Heb 2:14). Satan was destroyed not in his personality but in his authority and dominion. He is always opposed to those in eternal and vital union with Jesus Christ. He gains temporary advantages in his skirmishes with an heir of life but never ultimate victory.

(5) The opening of heaven's gates. 'When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.' (Te Deum). Paradise, lost by man's sin, is regained by Christ's cross. The first Adam brought in the penalty of death, the last Adam the blessing of life. The redeemed sinner under the influence and instruction of the Holy Spirit can echo the Apostle's declaration: '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.' (Gal 6:14).

Each of us is hastening to that 'bourn from whence no traveller returns.' While sovereignty detains us on these earthly lowlands, may the wondrous cross with all its blessed implications be our continual solace and support. And when through unmerited grace we reach the celestial heights we shall render thanks and praise eternally to the crucified Redeemer for the things, the teachings and the power of his wondrous cross.

(Adapted)

Sovereign Grace Union

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 - (c) The Deity and Personality of the Holy Spirit.
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