

WHY SEARCH FOR THE CROSS?

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If you have a new Rolls-Royce, you want to keep it polished like new. You may not say a word, but you are proud of your possession. Your incessant polishing says you “glory” in it.

Others show off fine clothes, a house or ranch, or revel in a brilliant career. Their music, art, science, or other hobbies and achievements are all they can talk about.

The apostle Paul had an obsession, which is the subject of this book. According to one version, he says, “God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Galatians 6:14.

That strange word “glory” eludes us, for we have no word in modern English that fully covers what it means. Combine all the will to attain, the pride of possession, the passion to know and appreciate, the charm of beauty, the yearning for thrills that we moderns know in our endless quest for life’s pleasures, then you can begin to sense what Paul meant when he said, “I . . . glory. . . in the cross.” “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Was This Man a Fanatic?

What did he see in the cross of Christ that inspired in him a life-long passion such as Michael Jordan had for basketball, Picasso for painting, or Yo Yo Ma for Bach? Is there something vital and compelling in the Bible that we are missing?

Scientists tell us that there are vast untapped resources of energy in ocean water, enough to meet mankind’s needs for power for generations to come. There are also vast untapped resources of spiritual energy in the cross that Paul tells us about so enthusiastically. Most of us make our faith into a toilsome and agonizing ordeal. We are simply ignorant of the gospel’s largely untapped capacity for changing people—a power that Paul plugged into.

His very conversion came as the result of a vision of Christ as the *crucified* One. He had been deeply immersed in hateful prejudice, but in one brief hour he saw that the cross where Jesus died proved His claims to be the long-awaited Messiah. That flash of insight on his way to Damascus invested the cross with an irresistible charm that never dimmed for him. Henceforth the cross was the sun shining in his sky, the gem itself of gospel truth—not a mere facet of it. It was the center and heart of Paul’s message from then on.

Our modern world knows little or nothing about that cross. To the ancient world it was a focal point of attention, “foolishness” to many, or a “stumbling block,” and always an “offense.” 1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11. But to the world today it is blah, a boring puzzle. “The offense of the cross” has not ceased, but the cross cannot be an offense if it is not understood.

It’s no wonder that the world today today is apathetic. Rather than fighting it as Paul’s world did, the modern world is steeped in lifeless ignorance of it. Yet one sees crosses almost everywhere—on

churches, around people's necks, in stained glass windows. Why such ignorance of its meaning?

How Satan shot Himself in the foot.

This darkness has been brought about by the cunning plans of the enemy of all good. Satan knew that the cross assured his utter defeat and exposed his complete depravity. It rang his death knell. All the universe of God watched Jesus die, like spectators in the grandstands watching a fight in the arena. Satan's hatred of Christ displayed in the crucifixion uprooted him forever from any tiny root of sympathy or affection in that vast audience. In this sense "the ruler of this world" was "cast out" when Jesus died on His cross. See John 12:31-33.

His mask torn off once and for all, Satan retained no sympathy from heavenly angels. No one who knew God's true character ever again would waste a thought of pity on Satan. So far as the great hosts of unfallen angels were concerned, Satan knew he had lost his case. All he could do now would be to hope to get this newly created planet on his side, and with that advantage wage "war" against Christ.

THERE REALLY IS A BEHIND-THE-SCENES CONSPIRACY!

Thus he formed his malignant design to blot the knowledge of the cross from the understanding of mankind. In setting up the "abomination of desolation" (Daniel 12:11), he forged a counterfeit of true Christianity. Its basic principle was to make a detour around the cross so that mankind should not get so much as a glimpse of its *meaning*. To fasten us in his deception, Satan was to exalt *the sign of*

the cross to be worshipped, to the exclusion of *the truth of the cross*.

Thus from the days of Constantine the sign of the cross became the emblem of professed Christianity, while a subtle counterfeit of the gospel wrought a "transgression of desolation" in the human heart. See Daniel 8:11-13. Christendom's history for over 1,600 years offers a pathetic comment on Satan's "great wrath" against the gospel, "Because he knows that he has a short time." Revelation 12:12. He has offered men a shadow in place of the substance. Those crosses worn about the neck or erected on church steeples or glazed in church windows are a familiar talisman, a charm or amulet, an adornment. Crosses of wood or metal are even worshipped, while the genuine, the *principle* of the cross, is unknown.

So confident is Satan of his plans that he freely permits talking about the cross, praying about it, singing about it, wearing it, using it as an architectural emblem, even worshipping it, just so long as he can thwart any attempt toward *understanding what happened there*. What more clever trick can a defeated enemy perfect than to take the sign of his defeat and transform it into an emblem of his victory?

The sun has truly been blotted from the sky of such "Christianity." Although the truth of the cross may not be consciously disbelieved or rejected, yet the failure to grasp its meaning results in a tragic loss, just as much as the rejection of the cross meant to the Jewish leaders of Christ's day. The

mind accepts the symbol while the heart fails to realize the experience.

THE GREATEST CONSPIRACY DEFEAT OF ALL HISTORY.

But we need not be misled by the meaningless symbol of an empty word. The forging of the counterfeit was meant only to forestall a search for the genuine. But the very existence of the counterfeit suggests that somewhere we shall find the genuine! The clouds and mist that Satan has sought to throw about the cross will be lifted for us, and we will come to see in breathtaking reality the same glorious revelation that Paul saw. What Satan hoped would be his *coup d'etat* turned out for him to be a self-inflicted total defeat.

Our personal victory over Satan is assured in these words: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb." Revelation 12:11. When and where was that blood shed? At the cross. John the Baptist's words still make sense: "*Behold!* The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John 1:29. "*Look to Me, and be saved,*" is what God asks us to do. Isaiah 45:22.

LOOKING IS PEOPLE'S FAVORITE PASTIME.

News magazines capitalize on this desire to "look" at something new. Millions spend their idle hours just watching the parade of humanity passing by their doors or their TV screens, or poring through picture magazines. If there is an accident on the freeway or anything unusual, we have an urge to "behold." All have this built-in yearning to feast our eyes on some sight *yet unseen*. There is an unsatisfied longing to see something ultimate.

Upon that cross of Jesus my eye at times can see

The very dying form of One who suffered there for me.

And from my smitten heart, with tears two wonders I confess:

The wonders of redeeming love, and my unworthiness.

I take O cross your shadow for my abiding place!

I ask no other sunshine, than the sunshine of His face.

Content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss

My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.

Elizabeth Clephane

What we long to see is that cross of Jesus. No other sight can satisfy.

And once we have seen it, like Paul, we will "glory" in nothing else. It will become our passion. If we "behold the Lamb of God," we will see a sight that has power to dissolve all idolatry into the nothingness that it is. Money, possessions, careers, fame, sensual pleasure, all lose their charm for the person who has *seen* what Calvary means. Life begins.

Let us look.

THE CROSS AS NATURE'S MYSTERY

Nature hasn't wanted to hide its secret. But for thousands of years sinful man trod the soil of this planet without seeing the most simple and

elemental secret written there—the way of the cross.

The farmer cast seed into the ground to produce his daily food without realizing the lesson each seed would teach him: that fruitful life comes only through surrender of life to death, so a new creature can come forth.

When at last a sinless Youth trod our soil, day after day He knelt upon it to pray to His Father for strength and wisdom to bring to man the answers to our questions: How can the problem of death be solved? How can the human race be redeemed from extinction? How can bad people become good?

HIS AMAZING DISCOVERY.

As Creator, Jesus had written the book of nature with His own hands. Now, as a Man, He sought to understand it, to draw from its mysteries a lesson that would point others to the only way of life—the way of the cross.

Later, when visitors from Greece asked to see Jesus, He answered them, “The hour has come that the Son of man should be glorified. . . . Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it; and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” John 12:23-25, 32, 33.

The seed that seeks “security” laid up in a vessel on a shelf comes to nothing because in cherishing its precious “self” it “remains alone.” Though without

fault, only that seed conquers death that finds a lonely grave within the darkened earth. Only by dying can it bring forth “much fruit” (KJV).

A TINY SEED TEACHES A POWERFUL LESSON!

To the sinless Youth seeking to discern the mystery, each flowering petal, each towering forest tree, bespoke a Gethsemane-like sacrifice for some little seed that died alone in the earth. What glory out of all proportion to its sacrifice does the tiny grape seed attain in the heavy vines laden with purple clusters of fruit! So, the Son of God knew, would His sacrifice become the means of “bringing many sons to glory.” Hebrews 2:10.

Through His young soul surged a mighty commitment: He would count Himself a “seed,” and cast His security and all that was precious to Him forever into the “soil” to die. Thus He drew from nature the elemental principle, previously undiscerned, that led to His wondrous cross, the secret weapon that vanquishes death.

It doesn’t matter whether Jesus as a boy fully understood that His sacrificial death would assume the form of a Roman crucifixion. What is important is that this ancient criminal death, the most shameful and spectacular, was the best way for the whole world to “see” the demonstration of His sacrificial love. For Him, to “fall into the ground and die” as a “seed” was more painful and bitter than enduring a mere physical death. The apostle Paul suggests a great contrast between “the death on the cross” and ordinary death. See Philippians 2:8. The full measure of ultimate death, the real thing

that is finitely more than the “sleep” we think of as death, is despair and shame to the uttermost. Jesus’ cross embraced that full measure.

But today the cross means little to us, because history has secured an almost complete reversal of values. Once suggesting the most ignominious and degrading torture a human being could endure, a death almost too terrible for even a demon to merit, the cross is now the world’s most honored emblem.

The reason for such a transformation in value lies deeper than a mere fortune of history. No hero worship centered in a martyr’s death could secure the awesome appreciation multitudes of intelligent people feel for Christ’s cross. To discover the reason for this appreciation is the purpose of this book.

THE CROSS TOUCHES THE TENDER NERVE OF OUR DEEPEST, INMOST NEED.

Whether or not profess to be religious, we need only a glimpse of its significance in order to be aware that there is something within the depths of our being which responds. The truth of the cross awakens strange overtones of appreciation, chords within human nature that nothing else can touch. History points to its own climax and objective when this truth shall at last penetrate the awakened conscience of every human being on earth.

Every one knows that a tender tie binds his soul to Calvary because the One who died there is so close to him as to be almost himself. There can be no sympathy with anyone else on earth so close as His sympathy with us and our sympathy with Him while He hangs on His cross. Since Christ died for

all, “they all share in His death.” 2 Corinthians 5:14, TEV. The truth-seeker knows this, and the truth-evader cannot avoid a confrontation with the truth he or she seeks to reject.

Believer or unbeliever, everyone will likewise ultimately know the *power* revealed at the cross. “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all peoples* to Myself,” says the Crucified One. We may choose to resist this “drawing” felt within our souls, but before any of us can possibly suffer the pain of being lost, we will be obliged persistently to resist. Rejecting love, “all those who hate Me love death,” Christ says. Proverbs 8:36.

BUT IF WE CHOOSE NOT TO RESIST, WE ARE “DRAWN” TO CHRIST THROUGH HIS CROSS.

A million devils, opposing through all the circumstances of life, are as powerless to counteract this drawing as is a thread to restrain a surging battleship. Jesus’ words to the inquiring Greeks can be understood only as a claim to universal power over the hearts of all people through the uplifting of His cross. No, it is not a claim that all will be saved, but that all will feel in some measure the drawing power of the cross, some to yield, and others perversely to resist.

THERE IS AN ALMOST IRRESISTIBLE CHARM IN CHRIST’S CROSS.

What is it? Something invests Christ’s cross with an appeal to the one who pauses to contemplate its meaning. If its Victim were merely a fanatical zealot or deranged mystic with a pitiable delusion that he was divine, or if He were merely a good man

tragically murdered, His death would make no more lasting impression on recurring generations than a martyr dying or the assassination of a statesman. Mankind would soon forget. *The Victim's claim to be God is what accounts for the timeless appeal of His death.*

But how can we know that He is divine? Is our faith rooted merely in tradition or superstition? Is our desire for eternal reward so strong that we are willing to assume the incredible in order to escape from the hard world in which we live?

A glimpse of the cross is better than all the labored arguments employed to prove that Jesus is divine. Once discern the nature of the love (*agape*) revealed there, and the Victim stands out clearly as none other than the Son of God. Only "God is love [*agape*]" 1 John 4:8. Human love alone could never stage or invent the demonstration we see there. The quality of love revealed is self-emptying, infinitely beyond our calculating, self-centered human love which easily fails test. Every one's heart convicts him that such *agape* must come from God alone, and that the hostility which murdered the Victim there was in essence our own "enmity against God." Romans 8:7. Jesus' *agape* carries its own built-in witness to prove its credentials are divine. That love was unearthly. No philosopher, poet, playwright, in thousands of years had dreamed of such a love.

This love sends the appeal of the cross home to human hearts in the awareness that the One who died thereon is every person's truest and closest relative, the unfailing Friend of Elder Brother who

has always loved us when we were most inclined to hate ourselves, the Companion who has remained with us in our shadows and believed in us when we doubted and disowned ourselves.

JESUS' FIRST LESSON ON THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

Why did He postpone the lesson so long? It is surprising to discover that Jesus waited until nearly the close of His three years of ministry before He clearly told the disciples about His crucifixion to come.

When we remember that the teaching of the cross is the one central theme of the gospel, the sun in the firmament of heavenly truth, we wonder why the Savior so long delayed instruction on that all-important truth.

Only an occasional mystic reference had He made to His death. There were only His remarks about "this temple" being destroyed and raised again in three days (John 2:19), of His being lifted up as the bronze serpent (John 3:14), of giving His "flesh" for the life of the world (John 6:51), of the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:39), or of a sad separation of a Bridegroom from "the children of the bridechamber" (Matthew 9:15, KJV).

But the disciples did not catch the meaning of these pregnant utterances. What they needed was a clear, full story of the soul-shaking event to come. This Jesus did not divulge until His visit to the coasts of Caesarea Philippi only a few months before the great trial of faith itself took place.

It is also surprising that not until the same time did Jesus venture to ask the disciples who they thought

He really was. Time must be allowed them to nurture the first superficial enthusiasm roused by His early ministry into the more sober conviction of a faith that could endure trial.

AND INDEED THEIR FAITH IN JESUS’ DEITY WAS SORELY TRIED.

Reluctant TO TAKE TO Himself the title “Son of God,” He found strange pleasure in persistently calling Himself the “Son of man.” He had progressively disappointed the fond hopes of the Jews regarding their expected Messiah, steadfastly declining the applause of people who would like to see in Him the fulfillment of their popular hopes, He seem all too content to remain in poverty and obscurity. He took no interest in courting the approval of the religious “establishment,” but instead pursued a course that appeared needlessly to attract their enmity.

After the difficult discourse on the Bread of Life (John 6), multitudes of former disciples went back to walk no more with Him. He even dared abruptly to dismiss a crowd who purposed to make Him king. Now He was becoming “despised and rejected of men.” The disciples could find every excuse, it seemed, to renounce even a purely human, worldly faith in Jesus as the Christ.

HOW THE DISCIPLES FINALLY RECOGNIZED CHRIST.

At the same time they had seen plenty of evidence to confirm the insistent convictions of the Holy Spirit that this Man was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God. And this evidence was not merely the physical miracles He performed. These could

be explained away by friend or foe, or at least disregarded. Physical miracles seldom strengthen true faith. What *did* confirm the faith of the disciples was the unworldly, supernatural, truly miraculous love seen in every word and act of Jesus. There was profound spiritual wisdom and heavenly common sense in all He said. These were the “very works” for whose sake Jesus appealed to Philip to believe Him. John 14:11, 12, KJV. Refusal to recognize *these* “works” was the hopeless and incurable sin of unbelief on the part of the Jewish leaders, not against the Son of man, but against the Holy Spirit.

But the disciples believed! Now at Caesarea Philippi, within a few months of the crucifixion, they were at last ready to confess their faith.

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’” Matthew 16:13. Their replies would have been flattering to anyone—except the Son of God. Popular fancy acclaimed Him as Elijah, Jeremiah, or another of the prophets. Unsatisfied, Jesus proceeded to ask His disciples to crystallize their somewhat vague conceptions into a confession of deep conviction. He put them on the spot: “But who do you say that I am?” Verse 15.

Peter was the first to find words to express the bold faith that had gripped their souls. Not only was this Man a greater than all the prophets; not only was He the long-expected Messiah. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he boldly confessed. Verse 16.

Jesus commended Peter's faith, but quickly cautioned him against the sin of supposing he deserved credit for it: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Verse 17. Peter must not be self-sufficient as though he were more clever than others.

As brilliant as fleshly brain cells may be, unless aided by the Holy Spirit the human mind is utterly incapable of recognizing God when He appears incognito. "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 12:3. The Son of God walked the dusty thoroughfares of life two thousand years ago quite unperceived and unrecognized by humanity, even as in all the years since then heavenly truth has been equally unperceived by "flesh and blood."

Now Jesus Goes to Work to Tell the Full Truth.

With the disciples' confession of faith, Jesus was now ready to lay the foundation and cornerstone of His church. "On this rock [that is, this confession of My identity] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:18. We now see Him laboring, swiftly, skillfully, a wise Master Builder and divine Craftsman, erecting an edifice of faith against which "the gates of hell" shall not prevail.

Now that the disciples were thoroughly convinced of His divinity, He was prepared to enlighten them about His death. Drawing aside all the mystic veils that had beclouded the previous brief references to the cross, He plainly, even bluntly, told them that He must be rejected and slain: "From that time

Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day." Verse 21.

Bad News!

The disciples listened with more astonishment than terror. The idea of God having a Son was revolutionary enough to their Jewish minds; now the thought of that Son of God dying seemed incredulous. This cannot be! A crucified Messiah in place of a glorified, crowned, world-ruling one? This was an insult to their intelligence, a scandal and a reproach. The more convinced the disciples were that Jesus was the Son of God, the more confused and confounded they were to be told that He must be put to death. And by the best people in the world, their own nation!

Now the same "blessed" Simon Bar-Jonah who had been first to confess the Son of God was first to deny His cross. Solicitous apparently, even for Jesus' mental health at hearing the astounding announcement so repugnant to his colleagues, the well-meaning Peter rudely grasped the person of his Lord as if to give Him a kind of shock treatment to jar Him from such morbid imaginings. No ill treatment could be accorded Him by members of the human race, especially by the Chosen People! "Then Peter took Him aside, and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to you.'" Verse 22. Crosses are for felons, not for anyone good, and especially not for One who is the Son of God!

Thus was the cross both a “stumblingblock” and “foolishness” to the first disciples, and an “offense” as well. Thus is it even today to our human nature.

We Need not Be Surprised at the Confusion of the Disciples.

If “flesh and blood” could not comprehend the idea that Jesus was the Son of God, much less could Peter unaided comprehend the doctrine of the cross. The very idea was something so utterly beyond human invention as to be unfathomable to their minds without the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

It was good that Jesus had first drawn from the disciples their confession that He was the Son of God before springing this shocking news on them. Otherwise they would have bolted in unbelief and abandoned Him as did so many others of His interested followers had just done. Man-made religions could invent “messiahs,” but none could conceive of a suffering, dying Messiah giving Himself in unutterable love for the world.

Are We Better or Wiser than Peter?

Our unaided human thinking today is just as blind to the truth of the cross as was that of the first disciples. We are in even greater peril; we have what they did not have—a mental knowledge of the facts of the crucifixion and a nearly universal recognition that it really happened, but this “head knowledge” can confuse the avenues of approach to a heart understanding of the cross.

If we have the least idea that our fortunate birth in the Christian era now gives us any advantage over Peter, we may feel that we naturally are wiser than he was, living as we do in a more enlightened age.

We have graduated out of spiritual ignorance like his! And then, we miss the whole point of the gospel.

We cannot even begin to comprehend what took place at Caesarea Philippi unless we realize that our human nature is the same as was Peter’s. Failure to recognize this may expose us to the tragedy of repeating on a fatal plane Peter’s spurning of the cross. He spurned it ignorantly; we may be in danger of rejecting it knowingly. Incidentally, that will be the final sin of lost people.

The Reason Why Peter Reacted as He Did Is Obvious.

The idea of the cross was something so original, unworldly, that it could arise only in the mind of God. The cross is both the “wisdom” and the “power” of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. It is a divine strategy of spiritual warfare of sublime skill. But Peter’s response to the Savior’s stunning announcement was the same as that which people of every place and age would experience. He was expressing the thoughts of our own hearts, even today, in treating as repugnant foolishness the very idea of being crucified.

Jesus revealed this insight in His rebuke to Peter for his disrespectful and irreverent interruption: “You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of man.” Matthew 16:23. Peter was simply a man, as any one of us is, who could comprehend only the things that are of men! Peter was no more “wicked” than any of us—he was just being himself. And being himself, he couldn’t fathom “the things of God” enough to

discern the meaning of the cross. Those “things of men” which blinded his understanding blind ours as well.

But we have not yet considered the real source of Peter’s opposition to our Lord’s cross. Jesus was not rude or angry with the poor man, and His words were no passionate outburst of temper. The unmitigated severity of His stinging rebuke to His beloved disciple reveals a significant origin of Peter’s worldly sentiments. Jesus was merely putting His finger of recognition on the plague spot of mankind’s opposition to the cross: “He turned, and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me.’” Verse 23.

Poor Peter!

He had unwittingly let himself be a tool in the hands of Satan by seeking to turn Jesus away from His sacrificial purpose. That temptation was real to Jesus! Christ saw that Peter’s ideas had their source in the enemy’s original rebellion in heaven. Evading His cross was an alluring temptation to Jesus that He had to resist with all the power of His will. Serving as Satan’s amanuensis, Peter had touched a raw nerve in Jesus’ soul.

We are not to understand that Peter was Satan himself, but Peter’s attitude toward the cross was more than a reflection of fallible, uninformed human nature. It perfectly reflected the attitude of Satan himself.

We can imagine that the disciples by now were a subdued and quiet group as the full force of Jesus’ pointed rebuke began to sink into their minds.