

# **JESUS' FIRST LESSON ON THE MEANING OF THE CROSS**

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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.**

Reticent 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 seemed 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 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.

### **HOW LUCIFER CHOSE TO HATE THE CROSS**

If “flesh and blood” could not comprehend the idea of the cross, could Satan understand it? There is nothing dense or unintelligent about him—he understands well what he is doing.

Therefore, in order to be the enemy of the cross, he must have understood it clearly. Were there a residual knowledge of salvation unknown to him, to that extent his opposition to truth would be blind and innocent. He could not then be “the devil and Satan.” But knowing fully, Satan rebels.

*Why* must always remain the inscrutable “mystery of iniquity.” The how of his rebellion included the most determined and intelligent scorning of the cross.

Peter in his human innocence was treading too near to the former Lucifer’s ground when he tried to turn Jesus away from the cross.

When Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, his bait was the assurance that in transgression they would reach a higher life than they had been created to enjoy. “You will be as God,” he promised. Genesis 3:5, Hebrew. This desire to be as God was the same that led to Satan’s original sin in heaven:

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascent into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’” Isaiah 14:12-14.

No one can be as God without in fact seeking to displace God, because there can be only one “Most High.”

### **LUCIFER’S LUST LED TO SELF-LOVE.**

This has now become the natural “mind” of us all, apart from redemption. But the love of self leads to an “enmity against God.” Romans 8:7. Enmity in turn leads to murder. Jesus said of the devil, “He was a murderer from the beginning.” John 8:44. This is true because “whoever hates his brother is a murderer.” 1 John 3:15. Satan hated God, and was jealous of Him. So in the very beginning of Lucifer’s heavenly rebellion, the stark outline of a cross began to take shape in the shadows of eternity’s history.

Doubtless Lucifer began to see where his rebellion would elad. He saw that the crime he nurtured in his soul was a dark and ugly one—that of murdering the eternal Son of God. So terrible is one’s devotion to the love of self! Five times in Isaiah’s passage we read of Lucifer’s passion for his “I.” Sin has its roots in self-centeredness *indulged*.

Satan’s root problem was a hatred of the idea of agape, a love which is God’s character, totally different than anything we humans naturally think of as “love.” Our kind of “love” loves nice people; agape loves bad, mean people, even our enemies. Our love depends on the quality of its object; *agape* creates value in its object. Our love always wants to climb up higher just as Lucifer wanted to set his throne “above the stars of God;” *agape* is a love that dares to step down lower, as the Son of God

did in those seven steps of amazing condescension listed in Philippians 2:5-8. Our human love always wants to get; *agape* is always ready to give. Our human love seeks a reward; *agape* dares to relinquish it.

Last of all, what Satan hated the most was the ultimate revelation of *agape* displayed in Christ: *agape* dares to surrender eternal life, to die the second death. That is the supreme aspect of *agape* that Lucifer does not want the world or the universe to see. It's the opposite of everything he stands for.

Lucifer must have pondered long and earnestly the path he was choosing. Should he repent while there was still opportunity? If so, there could be only one way in which he might overcome the sin of his angelic soul—this wonderful “I” that sought to be “like the Most High” and to topple Him from His holy throne, would have to *die*. Self in Lucifer would have to be crucified.

### **HOW A BRIGHT ANGEL BECAME THE DEVIL, OR SATAN.**

A spiritual cross on which Lucifer must die to self was the only way out of his dilemma in his incipient war with God. All his pride, his ego, his precious, darling “I” that he had cherished, must perish willingly of his own free choice so that only truth, and right, and holiness might live. Lucifer came so near to yielding that he was able to grasp the significance of the one way of deliverance for him.

Then emphatically, indignantly, irrevocably, he rejected the idea. No cross for him! Once for all, intelligently and responsibly, Lucifer repudiated the idea of self-denial and self-sacrifice. He would

institute a new way of life for the vast universe of God—the love of the “I,” the way of self-seeking, self-assertion, self-love. Thus Lucifer rejected the cross.

It was then that he became the devil and Satan, “that serpent of old, . . . who deceives the whole world.” Revelation 12:9. A bright angel who hates the cross becomes God’s (and our) enemy.

This one bitter, unrelenting opponent to the divine principle of the cross well knows that the only avenue of return to righteousness for any sinful being in the universe is by way of the cross. Hence his studied, determined plan to blot the knowledge of that way from the consciousness of humanity. Anything satanic is anti-cross; the profound truth follows that anything anti-cross is satanic.

### **WHY WAS JESUS SO OUTSPOKEN TO PETER?**

The Saviour’s stinging rebuke to him becomes more intelligible in this light. It was not an outburst of irritated temper on Jesus’ part. Not only was Peter reflecting the “things of men,” he was also reflecting the things of Satan! He was unwittingly voicing the sentiments of the enemy when he urged Jesus to put self-interest first and renounce the idea of going to Jerusalem to be crucified. Self-interest, self-concern, spiritual self-preservation, are uppermost thoughts to the soul of this fallen mighty angel. They now were to Peter, too. Are they not to us as well?

The “things of men” are shown to have an unfortunate spiritual origin, and Peter has revealed the problem to us. Peter found himself unconsciously in cooperation with Satan in his anti-

cross campaign. Rightly understood, the temptation to turn Jesus aside from the cross was Satan's supreme weapon used over and over again throughout His earthly life.

Satan was not ignorant of the principle of the cross, but what he could not comprehend was the divine love revealed in the incarnate Christ that would lead Him to go all the way to the supreme sacrifice, and to do it voluntarily. The last malicious taunt flung at Christ was inspired by Satan—"Save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" Mark 15:30. And now at Caesarea Philippi self-interest is the ruling principle in the heart of dear Peter. He, too, is saying in effect, "Save Yourself, Lord." Jesus addressed him by his proper name when He said, "Get behind Me, Satan." Peter was anti-cross.

### **ARE WE LIKE PETER?**

We would do well to refrain from a heart attitude of superiority over this man. He was a Christian, and he loved his Master ardently. Not only was he a "church member," he was an ordained minister as well. He could point with pride to the experience of actually casting out devils in the name of Christ! He had just been signally blessed by the commendation of Christ. And yet he was unconsciously in league with Satan in trying to oppose what Christ had to do!

We too are Christians who love our Lord ardently. We may work for him, and we may point with pride and joy to an impressive lifework, rejoicing that apparently the devils are subject to us in Christ's name and that Satan falls like lightning from heaven at our mere word. Is it possible that we should

unwittingly be in the same spiritual state of misunderstanding that Peter was in that day when our Lord said, "Get behind Me, Satan"?

If it was possible for dear, winsome, lovable Peter to be blindly in accord with the sentiments of the enemy, it may be no less so for us. Whether or not that highly undesirable epithet applies to us depends upon our heart attitude toward the cross.

"Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."