

The Cross of Christ

by H. A. Ironside

"And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching *was* not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (1 Cor. 2. 1-5).

The second verse is that upon which I especially wish to base my remarks,

"For I determined not to know anything among you, save JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED. "

There are those who have taught that the Apostle Paul, in using these words, had in mind his address on Mars' Hill in Athens, where, according to some, he had departed a little from this specific message, but that disheartened over the result, in going to Corinth, he had changed his programme, and he was determined henceforth to know nothing save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

They may be right, but personally, I see no reason to believe they are correct. It seems to me that he is setting forth here that which had been the sum and

Substance of All His Preaching

from the time that God first saved Him. He tells us how he sought to be made all things to all men if by any means he might save some.

When he addressed the JEWS as a Jew that he might gain the Jews, still he knew nothing among them but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When to the GREEKS he became a Greek, in order that he might gain the Greeks, he knew nothing among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When to the men of CULTURE he spake, as a man of the schools, and referred them to their own poets, the authorities that they recognised, in order that he might press his message home upon them, he actually knew nothing among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When he came down to the cruder level of the UNCULTURED, and talked to them in terms that they could readily apprehend, of rain from Heaven and fruitful seasons, as the expression

of the great heart of God, yet he knew nothing among them but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

As he stood there on Mars' Hill with those philosophers gathered about him, and showed them that he was just as familiar with their philosophies as they were, that he had read their poets, that he was acquainted with their literature, even while he used all that as a preamble to lead to his great theme, when he came to the crux of the whole matter, it was that "God commandeth all men everywhere to repent; because He hath appointed a Day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He that raised Him from the dead." That was the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

So I take it, not that the Apostle is here looking back regretting the blunders of the past and determining that henceforth he would be more faithful, but rather that he was presenting what had been the matter and character of his preaching throughout the years, and he did not intend to change it in Corinth, but would continue with the only message that God has ever promised to bless, the only message that ever will be blessed to the salvation of lost sinners and the upbuilding of saints.

He tells us,

"The Preaching of the Cross

is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." In that he suggests that the message of the Cross has one character as presented to the world, and another character as apprehended by the people of God. It is this message of the Cross, this scandal of the Cross, of which he speaks in Galatians. But what does he really mean by that?

We speak so lightly of the Cross today, and have become so accustomed to hearing about it, that we fail sometimes to recognise what was really involved in that message in the day that Paul evangelized the ancient world proclaiming the Gospel of a crucified and risen Saviour. The Cross then was not an ornament to be worn on a chain; it was not a sign to be placed above some church building. The Cross was the symbol of deepest shame and ignominy; it spoke of an accursed death as do the gallows and the electric chair today.

Cicero, that great Roman orator, always concerned about the refinements of speech said, "*The Cross!* It is so shameful, it should never even be mentioned in polite society." Just as today if you were

in a company, and knew of some one present who had a friend or relative, who had committed so serious a crime that the poor wretch had been sentenced to death on the gallows or the electric chair, how careful you would be not to mention either at such a time! You would not want to say anything that might suggest the dreadful shame, the awful ignominy of such a death. That was the way men felt about the Cross, when the Apostle Paul wrote, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

The Necessity of the Cross

The life of Jesus was not enough; the character of Jesus would not do. Paul well knew that the life of Jesus apart from His ignominious death would never have saved one poor sinner. There are those today who say to us, it is not the death of Christ we are concerned about; it is the wonderful example, the teaching, the instruction of Jesus that saves and uplifts the race. But we might preach the example of Jesus; we might praise the philosophy of Christ, the advice and instruction He gave as to living, and yet if we left out the suffering of the Cross, our message would be absolutely powerless so far as the salvation of sinners is concerned. Men may use honeyed words as they speak of His incomparable life, and they may profess to admire greatly His ethical teaching, but they shrink from the implication of the mention of the Cross, and yet we are told, "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, the power of God, and the wisdom of God. "

The Unbeliever and the Cross

What message does the Cross bring to the unbeliever? In the first place it emphasises the incorrigible evil of the heart of man. It was not absolutely necessary that Jesus should die *on a Cross* in order to make atonement for sin. Do not misunderstand me; it was necessary that Jesus should die to make atonement; it was necessary that that holy spotless life of His should be given up on our behalf; it was necessary that He should pour forth His precious Blood; but, the Cross was not in itself ordained of God as the means of salvation for sinners. There was no merit in the wood.

There is a difference between God's fore-ordination and God's acceptance of what He foresaw. He knew what man would do to His Son, and He made that the occasion of the display of His grace. It was all predicted beforehand. The Cross was accepted by God when man had nailed His Son thereon and thereby expressed in all its fulness *the incurable wickedness of his wretched heart.*

Peter, standing up on the day of Pentecost, drove home to them their guilt, when he said, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

Oh yes, God knew they would do it when He gave His Son to come into the world, to leave the glories of Heaven; He knew to what death His Son was going forth. God sent Him into the world to give His life for our redemption. But this is the guilt of mankind, that God in love having sent His Son, the Son in love having come to settle the sin question, man said, "We will give Him the worst death, the most shameful death to which it is possible to subject a malefactor." So they led Him outside the city of Jerusalem, and nailed Him to a Cross.

I say it reverently; He might have poured out His soul unto death in Gethsemane, if the Scripture had not foretold the manner of His sacrifice. He might have shed His blood in some other way if it had pleased God to permit it, but God waited until man had done the very worst that he could do, and then He said, "I am going to do the very best I can do." Man could do nothing worse than to nail Him to the Cross, and as He hung there, God said, "I will make the Cross—the symbol of ignominy and shame—to be the great altar upon which the true sin offering is offered up for the sin of the world," and so the Cross is in the first instance the full expression of the wickedness of man's heart. Of course all this was foreknown and predicted, but it does not lessen man's responsibility.

But what I want you to see is, the merit was not in the cross of wood, the cruel nails, the thorny crown, or the piercing of the Saviour's side. The merit was all His own! It was His life given up, His blood shed, that purchased redemption. God saw from all eternity just how this would take place, as the expression of the foul malignity of Satan, and of Satan-controlled men.

God's Love and the Cross

In the second place, it is the full expression of the infinite love of God to guilty man. Do not think that if you had been there, you would not have joined with that throng; do not think that your heart is any different from the hearts of those who cried, "Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!" Remember it is written in the Word, "As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man." If you want to know exactly what your heart is, apart from divine grace, follow that multitude as they demand the death of the Son of God. "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" asked Pontius Pilate,

and the awful answer came ringing back, "Let Him be crucified!" That tells what man is; that shows up the corruption, the vileness, the iniquity of man's heart. He would go to the length of murdering God Himself if he could, in order to have his own way in this world. So when man had challenged God by hurling back the Blood of His Son in His face, saying, "We don't want Him; we reject His instruction," God said, "I will make Him the sacrifice, and through His blood, and that alone, you may be saved."

The Cross was the means by which peace was made, "Having made peace through the Blood of His Cross." God has shut man up to this: "You have accounted my Son worthy of nothing but a Cross; if you are ever saved, you will mount that Cross with Him in faith." That is what led the Apostle Paul to cry as he does in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, *who loved me and gave Himself for me.*" You see there upon that Cross the sinless One made sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

"The Holy One who knew no sin,
God made Him sin for us;
The Saviour died our souls to win
Upon that cruel Cross."

Now when we put our heart's trust in Him, we can see how in the Cross "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psa. 85:10). We have peace with God through the work that our blessed Lord accomplished on the Cross.

Christians and the Cross

The Cross not only had its message for the world, but the Cross has a message for the people of God. Let us not think of the Cross simply as the means whereby God is enabled to be "just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus," but the Cross now is presented to the believer as the test for his whole life.

In the first place, we see in the devotion of our Lord Jesus the pattern of humility, which you and I, as redeemed ones are called upon to follow. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Men talk about Jesus as our example, and He was our example, not as sinners, but as saints. Peter says, "He left us an example, that ye should follow his steps. "

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being

in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a Man, he humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross." Or, perhaps, literally, "He became obedient unto death, and such a death—that of the Cross." There you have the humiliation of the Son of God, and you and I are called to follow His steps.

We sing sometimes, "I'll go with Him up to Calvary, I'll go with Him all the way," and after all that is what we are called to do—to manifest the same spirit that He manifested, as we go after Him, and bear our cross. He laid down His life for us, and we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. Do not talk about trusting in the Cross of Christ for salvation, if you shrink from practical participation in that of which the Cross speaks in daily life.

The Flesh and the Cross

Then, too, the Cross is for the believer the sign of deliverance from the power of the flesh, of the death of the old man. "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin" (Rom. 6:6). "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" (Gal. 5:24). What does that mean, "Our old man is crucified with Him?" What is our old man? Some people think it is synonymous with our old nature, but it goes deeper than that; it is the man of old, all that you and I used to be in our unconverted state; the man that I once was. The man of old I see now crucified with Christ; that man has come to an end; that man has been nailed to a Cross, and I accept God's testimony, and have crucified the flesh.

But you remember how they stood at the foot of the Cross and said, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross," and how often self-interests lead us to look back at our old man, and say, "Come down; come and enjoy a little of the things that you once enjoyed; indulge in the things which you once loved." But no, faith says, "That man is gone, he has come to an end in the Cross."

You remember that oft-told story of

Old John the Fish Paddler.

He had been the disgrace of the town for many years, for he was always in a drunken state. But God, who loves to show great mercy to great sinners, took up old John and saved him; and after he was saved,

he was eager to provide a better home for his family. So he looked about until he found a suitable house, learned who owned it, went to him, and said, "I would like to rent that building; how much is the rent?" The man replied, "I wouldn't rent it to you at any price."

"Why, what do you mean?" questioned old John.

"I mean just what I say, not at any price; I wouldn't trust you. "

"Why," John said, "surely you don't know who I am or you would not talk to me like that."

"Yes, I do," replied the man, "that is why I wouldn't rent the building to you."

"Well," said John, "who am I?"

"Everybody knows you are old drunken John, the fish paddler," the man answered.

"Oh, no," said John, "you are mistaken; old John is dead; I am new John," and so he told him how wonderfully God had saved him; then he found the man ready to enter into negotiations with him. Yes, the old man is gone, for God says, my "old man was crucified with Christ," and I say "Amen" to that.

The Curse and the Cross

Then, too, the Cross of Christ speaks to the believer of deliverance from both the curse and the rule of the law, the law of Moses. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." In my unsaved state the curse of the law was hanging over me; Sinai's thunders were rolling over my head, but my blessed Substitute went to the Cross, and the storm broke over Him; the lightnings of wrath burned themselves out in His soul, and He drank the cup of judgment, He exhausted the curse of the law, and there is now no curse for me.

I have often told that little story of the emigrants who years ago were trekking the vast prairies of what are now the middle western states of America. They were covered with tall dry grass. The party had passed a river the day before, and were going on with their cattle and covered wagons, when suddenly they were horrified to see a thin red line across the western horizon. They said, "The prairie is on fire! Whatever shall we do?" There was dry grass almost up to the horses' heads, the prairie on fire, the river a day's journey behind them, and they knew of no barrier in front that might hold the flames back.

The Shelter of the Cross

One of their number was more used to pioneer life in the west, and he said, "Clear a space, and set fire to the grass behind you!" They did this, and the wind carried the flame away toward the river. "Now," he said, "come here on to the charred ground, and you will be safe." And so they took their stand there. They could already feel the heat of the fire on their cheeks, and one frightened little girl cried, "Oh, are you sure we won't be burned up?"

"My child," the pioneer said, "the flames can never reach us here; we are *standing where the fire has been.*"

"When you take your stand by faith at Calvary's Cross you are standing where the fire has been. Judgment can never reach you there.

"The wrath of God which was our due
Upon the Lamb was laid,
And by the shedding of His blood
Our debt was fully paid."

"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," and the apostle says, "I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:19, 20). The law put my Substitute to death on that Cross, and therefore, it has nothing to say to me. My relationship toward it has been changed by death.

The World and the Cross

But there is one other thought. The Cross of Christ is that which, rightly apprehended, separates me from the world. Has your soul laid hold on that which is found in Galatians 6:14? "But 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." Don't you see? The Cross has come in for ever between the world that I once loved, the world of which I was once a part, and myself as a sinner redeemed unto God by the precious Blood of Christ. When that world would woo me; when that world would seek to lure me by its follies, by its pleasures, by those things that are so attractive to the senses, the faithful heart replies,

"Nay world, I turn away,
Though thou seem pure and good;

That friendly outstretched hand of Thine
Is stained with Jesus' Blood."

I cannot be true to the Cross of Christ, and go on with the world that crucified Him. I have taken my choice, I have left the world behind for His dear Name's sake, and so I can glory in that which, to the world, is a scandal—THE CROSS OF CHRIST.

A young woman once exclaimed to an older one who was a devoted believer, "I would give the world for your Christian experience." "That is exactly what it cost me!" answered the other. "I gave the world for it."

May God give us to enter into these things more deeply and may the Cross be our one theme as we seek to bear witness for Him in this world of sin for His Name's sake.

"Most awful sight! on Calvary's mount
Three crosses stand on bold relief:
There, in the midst, the Saviour dies;
On either side there hangs a thief!
O blessed Saviour, by Thy pain
The sinner reaps eternal gain!

"O soul, on those three trees behold
The *saved*, the SAVIOUR, and the *lost*;
The story of our ruined world—
The Saviour's death, salvation's cost!
Heaven's door in judgment closed to sin,
Whilst faith in Jesus brings us in."

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