

The Cross-Centred Life

What if there was a place, that if you went there, you would immediately be reminded of what life is about? A place where you would see who God is. Where you truly see who you are. Where you are able, with just a few glances, to understand what you must do. Wouldn't you want to visit such a place?

What if upon visiting this place, you would enter into that life that you are always seeking for – one of joy, peace, contentment, satisfaction? What if this place was the shortest and surest way of knowing and loving God – of experiencing and delighting in Him? What if visiting this place, a number of times in the day, would increasingly lead you to fullness of joy, to abundant life? Would you want to go to such a place?

Paul had such a place – a place that was his only boast and treasure. As he says 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."* The place Paul returned to again and again was the cross. And coming to the cross, is where we need to be if we are to know God.

Not the sanitised cross, though. Not the beautiful shape that is made into gold and worn around people's necks. Not the lovely ornament sitting in churches. Not the lovely stained-glass window. Because the Son of God on the real cross was not a picturesque scene with sunbeams piercing through clouds in the background. It was horrific. If you had been there, you may have been sick to your stomach.

Crucifixion was one of the most torturous, cruellest deaths ever devised. It was awful pain – to be stretched out in a manner that usually dislocated your shoulders. This made it impossible to breath unless you pushed down on the nail through your feet to lift yourself up for a gasp of air. You'd be continually heaving up for air, and then falling back down on your dislocated arms. A searing thirst would usually result.

An unbearable migraine headache would usually be present, as well as severe dizziness and nausea. And as we look at Jesus, we see He is in a far worse state than the average person condemned to crucifixion. He has been whipped with a Roman cat-of-nine-tails, a whip with pieces of bone and metal at the end of it, designed to hook into the flesh and pull it out. Jesus' back is one huge open wound.

He has been punched with the bare fists of Jewish rulers who have scorned him with a growing, intense hatred. He has been punched with the bare fists of Roman soldiers. His face is bruised, perhaps his teeth are broken, his eyes maybe so beaten they are black and blue and almost closed because they are so swollen. On his head sits a crown of thorns, pressed into the flesh by sarcastic and cruel Romans.

That's the cross you come to and behold your God. Not the nice pictures of the shape of the cross. Not the rather touching pictures of Jesus on the cross from a distance. The stomach-churning, awful picture of Jesus Christ in this state, nailed to a wooden cross.

Now, why, of all places, would Paul make this his place to come back to? Why should this gruesome execution scene be the place that we as Christians return to in our minds again and again?

1. Coming to the Cross Shows You who God Is

Here on the cross is where we most clearly see who God is, as God is revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ, and Jesus is revealed most clearly on the cross:

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

John 1:18

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2

The climax of Christ's ministry, the pinnacle, the blazing centre, is not the miracles, or the parables, or the discourses – it is the crucifixion. In fact, all the Gospel writers give more space to the last week of Jesus' life than any other week in his life. Christ came to die. His mission was the cross: "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many*" (**Mark 10:45**).

As you come to the cross, you find out who God is.

- **God is sinless**

What is going on at the cross? God is making a loud statement about sin. Just as a lamb had to be sacrificed as a substitute for the sinner, so now Jesus, the Son of God, is suffering in the place of sinners.

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

John 1:29

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

1 Peter 1:18-19

What this says is God is so committed to taking care of the sin problem, He is even willing to send His perfect Son to be the Lamb. He will not brush sin under the carpet. He will not turn a blind eye to it. He will not dismiss it or ignore it. As you behold the broken and bruised body of Jesus, as you see the darkness descending over that scene, as you hear Jesus cry out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*" (Matthew 27:46) you see: this is a holy God.

God hates sin and will punish it. There are only two places where your sin ends up punished: either in hell, or on the cross. This is the extent of God's commitment to justice. He wants to pardon people, but there must be a punishment to fit the crime: there must be justice meted out.

- **God is sovereign**

God is absolutely in control – He is the ultimate ruler. God's sovereignty is displayed on the cross in an unusual way. There He is, apparently weak, apparently at the mercy of other

men. He looks to be anything but in control. Then we remember that Jesus had often spoken about his own crucifixion. How could he know exactly what would happen unless it was part of His Sovereign plan?

There were prophecies recorded hundreds of years earlier, in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. How could God have inspired men to write these prophecies, if He was not in control of their actions?

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain...

Acts 2:23

"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

John 10:17-18

In other words, as you behold Jesus on the cross – don't pity him as weak. Worship him as strong. He could have come down at any moment. He could have called on thousands of angels to destroy those who had accused him and crucified him. But instead, the Creator and Sustainer of the world voluntarily died for our sins.

It is He who keeps the heart beating of the Roman soldier as he puts the nails in His hands. He continues to supply air to those shouting at him, 'Come down from the cross if you are the Messiah.' This is not weakness, it is meekness – He is a powerful God, whose power is under control – directed for a specific purpose.

But look again – and see what this tells you about God. Here is the sinless Son of God dying. Why is he dying? We are told the wages of sin is death. But when did he sin? He did not. He is dying on behalf of others – those whose sin would condemn them to be separated from God for eternity.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:7-8

- **God is love**

God loves you. He was willing to face your punishment, so that you could go free:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:9-10

So He is a sacred and sinless God; He is a sovereign God; and He is a loving God – but take one more look, this time at the big picture.

- **God is supreme**

Jesus on the cross is as low as any human could possibly go, therefore, he is as high as anyone can possibly be. He always was God, always shall be God, and the cross proved that He is Supreme. He is exalted, absolutely first, and the centre of all.

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. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

The cross is like a prism which splits light into its colours. On the cross we see the justice of God, the grace of God, the anger of God, the wisdom of God, the meekness of God, the omnipotence of God, the faithfulness of God, the patience of God, and many others. When God wants us to know what He is like, He does not only send us to Isaiah's vision, or Ezekiel's vision, or John's vision. He sends us to a lonely hill outside Jerusalem called Calvary – and says: 'that's who I AM.'

But coming to the cross has a second effect.

2. Coming to the Cross Shows You Who *You* Are

If we are to ever know God, love Him, and serve Him, we must know who and what we are before Him. The big problem with pride is that it makes us think we truly know ourselves. But in fact, what we know is our pride's deceitful opinion of who we are. We need God to come and show us our selves.

When the prophet Nathan confronts King David with his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba, he uses an example that allows David to judge the wrongdoer. In this way, Nathan essentially lets David condemn himself, pointing out, "Thou art the man" [who has sinned and deserves death] (2 Samuel 12:7). Similarly, on the cross God communicates to us, 'Thou art the man; thou art the woman' [who has sinned and deserves death] - we should in fact be there on the cross instead of Jesus, as penalty for our own sins.

- **You are sinful**

For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

2 Corinthians 5:21

That terrible suffering of Jesus was bearing the anger of God. He became a lightning rod for God's anger and justice. He faced hell on the cross – separation from God, physical torture, searing thirst, darkness. But he was in our place. We should have been there. Therefore the cross tells us – we are sinners. We have greatly offended God. We are not all the wonderful

things that the world tells us we are. Before God, we see on the cross what He says we deserve. That should humble us in the dust. But as you look at the cross, it should send another message. Jesus died for my sins, because I could not satisfy God's anger with my own death.

- **You are helpless and needy**

The cross shows me: I am a creature, completely weak before God and needing help. I cannot save myself. I am wholly at God's mercy. If He shows me mercy – I can stand before Him, if not, I am doomed.

- **You are small**

As I stare at the cross, I see I am standing before the Supreme Creator of the universe. I see that this is the humblest act ever performed from the most exalted Supreme One in the universe, and therefore, I should feel very lowly, very small, very tiny in His presence. As I stare at the gruesome scene – I think, 'He made the stars, He made the earth, in Him I live and move and have my being.'

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?

Psalm 8:3-4

Logically then, as we come to the cross and see who God is, and who we are, it must cause the third reaction.

3. Coming to the Cross Shows You How To Respond

Once I see and understand that this God is Holy, and that I should have been there, that I am a sinner, then my response can only be to be broken. I must **repent** of what displeases Him. I see that He is the Sovereign, and His way is perfect. So I yield to Him, I **surrender and submit**. We must respond to His love with love.

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if One died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

And he said to them all, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

Luke 9:23

An appropriate response to coming to the cross is to say, 'I will follow You, Lord, not my own way.' As Christ Himself said before God, "Not my will, but Thine be done" (**Luke 22:42**).

Seeing Him as the powerful, all-sufficient, loving God who seeks to meet my need, and seeing that I am helpless, weak and needy, I must also turn to Him in **dependence**. All day, every day, I need to come back to the cross and realise my need of God.

Do you know why? If you remove the cross, not a single blessing could come your way. God would only be against you. So any single thing above what we deserve – eternity in hell – comes to us because of the cross. So we should keep running back to it, and saying, ‘Yes God, I need you! I depend on You! I trust You as my Saviour, my Substitute, my Shepherd, my Lord.’

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.

Galatians 2:20

Seeing God as the Supreme One, the one who is exalted above all, should also cause me **to be lowly**. No one boasts in the presence of a king. That is why Paul says that his only boast in life is Christ, and Him crucified, saying, essentially: ‘I will not think of myself more highly than I ought when I come to the cross. I will not boast in my achievements, in my righteousness, in my intelligence, in my abilities. At the cross, I am slain. It counts for nothing – I should be on that cross, but in my place is the Eternal Son of God.’

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.

Galatians 6:14

On the Other Side of the Cross Is the Joy We Are Seeking

Picture the cross as being in the middle of a pathway. On the other side of the cross are all the promises of God – fullness of joy, satisfaction in God, delighting in Him, knowing him, and loving Him. But to get there, you can’t go around the cross. You can’t avoid it. You can turn back, but then you forfeit all the things God promises for you.

However, if you go forward, you see the cross has a little doorway at the bottom, but it is very low, and very small. To get through, you will have to lower your neck, like one repenting of their sin. You will have to lower your folded arms, and extend them like one depending on someone else. You will have to kneel down like a servant submitting to his master. In fact, you may have to be almost flat on the ground, like a subject of a kingdom worshipping the king.

Only then are you low enough and small enough to fit through that little door. But in that position, you crawl through the cross, and what is on the other side? Life – abundant life. The life of loving God with all your heart, soul and mind. The life of seeing God’s glory, the life of beholding God in the Word of God, and in your life.

The life of being caught up in rapturous adoration for God, of treasuring Him like never before. The life of being intimate with God, and finding grace for every need, contentment in Him, peace in him, joy in Him. That life of fullness of joy, that life of seeing and adoring God – it’s on the other side of the cross. It’s that resurrection life.

But there is no entering in to the blessing of abundant life if we seek to avoid the cross. All of us must go through it. How often and how willing you are to come to the cross and go through it, is the explanation for what kind of enjoyment of God you are experiencing right now.