

Why the Cross Should Give Us Courage

The cross is the emblem of our faith. Someone might argue that the empty tomb should be the emblem. I disagree because the compelling distinctive of Christianity is not that God is alive; many other world religions believe that. The compelling distinctive of our faith is that God died.

What other religion brags on the death of its leader? Such a notion is so scandalous that no earthly mind conceived it. This came from heaven. The cross is the balance beam of Christianity. Every excessive doctrine has strayed from its centrality. You're never safer than when clinging to the cross. If you can't get something through the cross, don't take it with you.

Some tend to avoid mentioning the cross. Their concern is that it might repel seekers. But Jesus seemed to see it differently: "And if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32). The cross has a gravity all its own. You don't have to defend the cross; just exalt the cross, and it will draw people to Jesus.

When you truly see the cross, it fills your screen. It is the elephant in the room. It's gripping, arresting, unavoidable and inescapable. When you see the cross, how can you just go on with your day? How do you get past the contorted nakedness, the wheezing, gasping lungs, the fire in His eyes or the flame in His heart? What do you do with a crucified God? Make your boast in the crucified Christ. The blood is our banner and the shame is our glory. Make much of the cross! Speak much of what Thomas Dubay called "consummate splendor in monstrous horror."

We had a pretty nice religion there for a while, until the cross came along. The cross changed everything. It ripped the

innards out. It came through like a tsunami and swept the place clean of propriety, dignity and modesty. You can't even have your clothes.

Now, nothing is safe. The cross demands everything. Love came along like a torrential river, caught up Christ in its mighty currents and carried Him to His death. If that same current grabs your legs, it'll sweep you to your death too. But losing your life, you'll find it.

What's Inside Will Come Out

If you want to see what's inside a man, nail him to a tree, and what's inside will come out. Jesus is known for saying seven things during the crucifixion. When they pierced Him, here's what came out:

1. Forgiveness: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Jesus spoke these words while they drove nails in His hands.
2. Promise: "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus spoke these words to the crucified thief who called on Him.
3. Compassion: "When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then He said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time, this disciple took her to his own home" (John 19:26-27). Jesus appointed His mother's care.
4. Loyalty: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). In His darkest hour, He still called His Father "My God."
5. Longing: "I thirst" (John 19:28). Jesus longed for His Father.
6. Confidence: "It is finished" (John 19:30). The work of the cross had been accomplished.
7. Surrender: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit'" (Luke 23:46).

The presiding executioner was so stunned at what came out of this crucified Nazarene that he exclaimed, "Truly, this Man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Forgiveness, promise, compassion, loyalty, longing, confidence, surrender. These are the things I want coming out of me when I'm being crucified!

Jesus created the human body for crucifixion. At creation, while Jesus was fashioning a human body for Himself, I can imagine the Father saying, "Son, are You sure You want to put all those nerve endings in the hands like that? That's where they're going to put the nails. Son, are You sure You want to put all those nerves in the feet like that? That's where they're going to put the nail."

And I imagine the Son replying, "Yes, Abba, I know. I want to feel their sorrows in the very depths of My being."

No one has suffered like God. No one can look at God and say, "But You don't understand my pain." You can't get lower than the cross. In sufferings, Jesus sank lower than the most contemptible human being. But herein lies the glory of the cross. Like a giant dipper, it reaches below the lowest human specimen and lifts us up into the glorious inheritance of the children of God.

David's Greatest Honor

The greatest honor of David's life was not that he wrote some of the greatest psalms of the Bible. The greatest honor in David's life was not that he was crowned king of Israel or that he was an ancestor to the Messiah. The greatest honor in David's life was being quoted three times on the cross: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"; "I thirst!"; and "Into Your hands I commit My spirit."

When Jesus was in the throes of ultimate suffering and seeking vocabulary to express the anguish of His soul, He reached back to David, implying, "David wrote it the way I feel it right now!" Let me ask, what kind of journey would you have to walk

in order to write the kind of thing Jesus would want to quote on His cross?

This makes sense of the extremity of David's bitter cup. His sufferings brought him into a unique identification with the crucified Savior. What seemed at the time to be abandonment by God was in actuality unparalleled union with God. No angel gets a cross. It's too high an honor for angels. No angel gets a resurrection. You get both. It's your highest dignity.

Satan's Ancient Accusation

Whenever I'm hurting, I make my way back to the cross. When I can't see my way forward, I go back to the cross. Whenever I hear that ancient accusation, "He's withholding from you," I just go back to the cross. I call it "ancient" because it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Satan essentially said to Eve, "God is withholding from you the fruit that would make you everything you were meant to be." Perhaps you've heard some of these accusations:

- "God is withholding from you the job that would maximize your giftings and potential."
- "God is withholding from you the healing that would release you into fruitful service."
- "God is withholding from you the spouse you long for."
- "God is withholding from you the ministry opportunities that would make you flourish."
- "God is withholding from you the blessing He could easily give you."

Whenever I hear these accusations, I just go back to the cross—because the cross nails that accusation. When I come to the cross, I don't see a God who's withholding from me. Rather, I see a God with nails in His hands and feet who spreads His arms and says to me, "I give you My mind. I give you My soul. I give you My heart. I give you My flesh. I give

you My strength. I give you My last breath. I give you My last drop of blood.”

When I come to the cross, I don't see a stingy God but a God who's giving me His best, His everything. That's why I declare that my God withholds nothing from me. And if He hasn't healed me yet, it's because He knows how to write the story better than I do.

His cross now gives me the courage to stand on my nail, spread my arms and say to my Beloved: “I love You with all my heart, all my mind, all my soul and all my strength. I am Yours, and You are mine.”

They Didn't Know What They Were Doing

When Jesus stood before Him, Pilate didn't know what he was doing. As Jesus said, “They know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Pilate didn't know he would one day stand before the Man standing before him now. None of Jesus' enemies knew what they were doing at the cross. But neither did His friends.

Simon of Cyrene, for example, didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know he was carrying on his back a beam that we would be singing about today (Matt. 27:32). He didn't know the post across his shoulders was the lightning rod of God's wrath. He didn't know that as he came under the burden of that beam—producing perspiration on his brow—the Man walking next to him was carrying a much heavier burden up that hill—the sins of the whole world.

Mary of Bethany was another friend who didn't know what she was doing, either. When she poured fragrant oil on Jesus' feet (John 12:3), she didn't know that Jesus' burial would be so rushed there wouldn't be enough time for the standard Jewish treatment of spices. She didn't know she was anointing His body for burial (John 12:7).

Nor did Joseph of Arimathea know what he was doing when he

asked Pilate for permission to bury Christ's body (John 19:38). He didn't know that as he lowered the corpse from the cross, his neck was being soiled with the blood that was taking away the sins of the world. He didn't know his garments were being stained with the most powerful detergent in the universe.

And when you come to the cross, you probably don't know what you do, either. When you take the cross on your lips and ask for the blood of Jesus to wash your sins, you probably don't realize how deeply you touch God at the center of His being. Just mention the blood, and God relives everything that happened on that cross. There's a verse that says, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8). The day Christ's flayed flesh hung on that cross seemed, to God, to last a thousand years. It just never seemed to stop. The same verse says that to God, "a thousand years [is] as one day." So that an event which we look back upon and say, "That happened 2,000 years ago," was for God merely a couple days ago.

God has not forgotten even a modicum of the terror and horror of Calvary. It's as fresh in His mind today as the moment it happened—which is what makes the blood of Christ so powerful. When you place your faith in the work of Christ's cross, Abba Father opens the storehouses of His heart and lavishes upon you the riches of His grace, the abundance of His acceptance and the fullness of His mercy. You probably don't know it, but your simple prayer turns heaven inside out. And it's all because you place your faith in the cross of Christ.

The cross opens the most preposterous possibility imaginable: God now justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). I denied Him, betrayed Him, tried Him, delivered Him to Pilate, scourged Him, beat Him, spat on Him, crowned Him with thorns, pounded nails into His body, mocked Him and thrust a spear in His side. In return, He put a ring on my finger, a robe on my back, sandals on my feet and gave me the family fortune. What kind of love is this?

The Cross Gives Courage

“Here is the Man!” Pilate cried (John 19:5). That invitation continues to rumble through the centuries. Look again upon the cross. You can’t dismiss the cross; you must judge the cross. Either it’s the greatest hoax of history or it’s something altogether worth dying for. You be the judge. Behold this spectacle today and once again affirm your loyalty to the cross of Jesus Christ. Pastors, put the cross at the center of your preaching. Worship leaders, make the cross the center of your worship. I call on every believer to put the cross back at the center of our affections.

In Jesus’ time, Joseph of Arimathea was prominent in the 70-member Sanhedrin (the ruling council of the Jews in Jerusalem). The Sanhedrin would automatically disfellowship from their synagogues anyone who professed allegiance to Jesus. For that reason, Joseph told no one of his personal faith in Christ. He knew if he went public, he would lose his membership, his status, his income stream, his favor, his influence—everything he had labored all his years to achieve. He had faith, but he just kept it to himself.

Then the cross happened. When Joseph watched Jesus agonizing on the cross, something changed inside. He decided to go public with his faith. Here’s what the Scripture says about it: “Joseph of Arimathea, an honorable member of the Council, who also waited for the kingdom of God, came and went in boldly to Pilate, and requested the body of Jesus” (Mark 15:43).

 The cross gave Joseph the courage to publicly confess his faith. By asking for Jesus’ corpse, he was revealing his solidarity with this crucified carpenter. When you truly see the cross, it will have the same effect on you. The extravagance of His sacrifice infuses you with courage to risk everything and give your all for Him.

Look at the cross. Then gather your courage and let everyone know, "I swear my head, my heart and my soul to the cross of Jesus Christ." I dare you to stand at the foot of the cross today and tell the world, "I'm with Him." {eoa}

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