

Why Easter Loses Its Luster Without This Gospel Linchpin

Christianity stands alone as the only religion whose founder came back from the dead. This month, millions of believers will celebrate the greatest event in history—the Resurrection of Christ! How ironic that the world's best news came from a graveyard. The Easter story is the linchpin that holds Christianity together. Without the cross and the Resurrection, the gospel crumbles like a house of cards.

What is unique about Christianity is Jesus. He alone can claim a virgin birth, a virtuous life, a vicarious death and a victorious Resurrection. By defeating death, Christ validated His claim to divinity, activated His atoning work on Calvary, separated Christianity from all other religions and indicated the future resurrection of the saints (1 Cor. 15:12-23).

It's been said that religion is man's effort to reach God; Christianity is God's effort to reach man. Religion is when man reaches up; Christianity is when God reaches down. Jerry Noble observed, "Religion is man-made; the gospel is God-given. Religion is what man does for God; the gospel is what God does for man. Religion is good views; the gospel is good news. Religion ends in outer reformation; the gospel ends in inner transformation. Religion often becomes a farce; the Gospel is always a force—the power of God unto salvation." Unquestionably, the crux (most crucial element) of Christianity is the cross. The old saying is true, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." "For to those who are perishing, the preaching of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). To believers worldwide, the cross is still the main thing.

The cross is more than merely a historical event, more than a

fashion accessory for jewelry. It is the centerpiece of the gospel, the focal point of human history and God's masterpiece. The cross is a bridge that connects a loving God to a lost humanity. The Romans used crosses to torture, humiliate and eliminate their political enemies. God used the cross to conquer our spiritual enemies—sin, Satan and death. God took a sadistic instrument of torture and turned it into a universal icon of hope and salvation.

D. L. Moody explained the necessity of the cross, "I must die or get someone else to die for me. If the Bible doesn't teach that, it doesn't teach anything. And that is where the atonement of Christ comes in." This principle is at work even in the natural food chain—something must die in order for something else to live.

I'll never forget driving behind a truck headed to a local chicken processing plant. My son, who was 5 or 6 at the time, asked me where they were taking the cages full of chickens. I delicately tried to tell him that those live chickens would be turned into chicken fingers and nuggets. His response was priceless. He said, "Dad, let's join hands and pray together that all those chickens escape."

Jesus could have escaped (Matt. 26:53); instead, He became our scapegoat on the cross. In Old Testament times, the sins of Israel were confessed over a scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Hebrew word for scapegoat is *Azazel*, meaning "the goat of departure." Once the sins of Israel were transferred to the goat, it was released to wander in the wilderness, never to be seen again. Symbolically, their sins were removed from them (Ps. 103:12). Notice a double transfer transpired—their sins were transferred to the scapegoat; the innocence of the animal was transferred to them.

Something similar took place on the cross. Jesus became our substitute and paid our penalty of sin—death. Isaiah 53:5 explains, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was

bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed." A young woman was caught speeding in California and ordered to appear in court. The judge enforced the law and fined her \$100. Then he stepped down from behind the bench, removed his judicial robe and opened his own wallet. He took out a \$100 bill and paid the woman's fine because she was his daughter. Likewise, our heavenly Father sentenced us for our sin, but then He paid our penalty by sending His Son to die on the cross as our substitute.

These song lyrics say it well, "I should have been crucified, I should have suffered and died. I should have hung on the cross in disgrace, but Jesus, God's Son, took my place."

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, summarized his entire theology with four simple words—"He died for me." Paul penned his agreement, "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Ironically, the place of death became a place of life. Jesus was crucified at a place called by the Hebrew term *Golgotha* and the Latin term *Calvary*. They both mean "the place of the skull." It was called this either because the hill resembled a human skull or because skulls littered that place of execution. Only God could take such a cursed place and turn it into the greatest blessing for all mankind.

The geographical center of London is a place known as Charing Cross. There is a train station there, and you can find your way anywhere in the city from that location. Once a little boy got separated from his parents and was lost. A policeman found him crying and tried to comfort him. When he got the boy settled, he asked, "Can I take you home, son?" The boy replied, "Oh no, sir, take me to the cross, and I'll find my way home."

This Easter season, take time to revisit the cross. If you get to the cross, you'll find your way home. Minus the cross, there is no Easter, no Christianity, no salvation, no reason to have church, and we are hopelessly lost in our sins. I enjoy egg hunts and chocolate bunnies as much as anybody, but nothing can replace the cross—it's the crux of Christianity.
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