

The Unparalleled Cross

By: Keith R. Keyser

*“And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, **even the death of the cross.**”* *Philippians 2:8*

People sometimes read the account of Jesus’ crucifixion as if it is an ancient event that does not pertain to them. Yet the Scriptures make it plain that everyone – Jews and Gentiles – must reckon with the crucified Christ and what His death on the cross means for them personally. One may not remain neutral in Calvary’s shadow. The Lord Jesus’ death on the cross sets Christianity apart from all other belief systems, and reveals the truth about everyone: ancient or modern; rich or poor; educated or illiterate – as well as every other human demographic.

A Unique Event In The Annals Of Human History

No humanly devised philosophy or religion could invent the Lord Jesus’ unparalleled sacrifice on the cross. Numerous belief systems have martyrs like Socrates or Joseph Smith; others have noted prophets and teachers like Gautama Buddha or Muhammed. Yet only biblical Christianity has the propitiatory offering of Christ, taking place on a despised gibbet of shame. As the classic commentator J.C. Ryle notes:

The cross is the grand peculiarity of the Christian religion. Other religions have laws and moral precepts, forms and ceremonies, rewards and punishments. But other religions cannot tell us of a dying Saviour. They cannot show us the cross. This is the crown and glory of the Gospel. This is that special comfort which belongs to it alone. Miserable indeed is that religious teaching which calls itself Christian, and yet contains nothing of the cross. A man who teaches in this way, might as well profess to explain the solar system, and yet tell his hearers nothing about the sun.ⁱ

A modern writer agrees in these words:

The cross is the focal point of all of Christianity. Everything hangs on the cross—everything. In the cross the Christian church has something no other religion or philosophy has...None but Christianity has a salvation plan so strong, so poignant, or so absurd to human thinking. None but Christianity has a point in time where God, evil, and mankind collided so violently that it abolished the sin that separated man from God and changed man forever. Men and religions have long despised and stumbled over the cross. The Jews of Jesus’ day could not fathom their Messiah coming and dying. After all, messiahs don’t die. The Romans saw a dying god as weak and unworthy of their allegiance—gods aren’t slain by mortals. Islam flatly rejects the cross, saying it is inappropriate that God’s prophet would succumb to such an end.ⁱⁱ

The cross uniquely demonstrates God’s perfect righteousness. It shows that He hates sin, and yet justly extends mercy and forgiveness to repentant sinners while justifying them – declaring them righteous in His sight (Rom. 3:25-26.)

Who Knows What Lurks In The Hearts Of Men?

The cross exposes the human heart by stripping away the façade of human wisdom, culture, religion, and politics. The best and the brightest from Rome and Judea united to put the Son of God to death. An early Christian prayer describes it thus: “ For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, **both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together** to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27-28; boldface mine.) As Paul further explains it: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, **which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory**” (1 Cor. 2:7-8; boldface mine.) Human jurisprudence was found wanting due to human pride, envy, and the desire for personal advancement. The exalted ethical and legal system crafted by the Jews over centuries pronounced God the Son to be a blasphemer (Matt. 26:65.) Additionally, the vaunted Roman justice system executed a patently innocent man, whose perfect righteousness was clearly demonstrated by His many acts of kindness (John 18:38; Acts 10:38.)

Why did religious people like the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees reject their Messiah? The answer lies in Christ’s relationship to their carefully-cultivated religious image. As Stott points out:

Ostensibly Jerusalem rejected Christ on theological grounds, and outwardly the Pharisees condemned Jesus for blasphemy. But beneath these intellectual and doctrinal objections was a hostile will. Jesus had exposed their hypocrisy and unmasked their sins. Their pride was wounded. They felt humiliated. They hated him for his holiness. They were jealous of his influence on the common people. These things were at the root of their repudiation of Christ. But it was more respectable to find fault with his theology than to admit their moral embarrassment. Their doubts were a cloak for their sins. It has often been so. I do not say it is always so, because of course many people have genuine theological problems. But frequently a man's deepest need is not intellectual but moral, and his supposed inability to believe is really an unwillingness to obey.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why did a veteran Roman civil servant knowingly condemn an innocent man to death? The Bible says that what finally swayed Pilate to crucify the Lord Jesus was this jibe: “If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar” (John 19:12.) So there it was: career and ambition versus truth and justice; advancement in this world or in the next; Caesar or Christ – all people must take a side on this issue. Either one lives for this world or they live for the one to come. If they love this evil age, they will be condemned

with it. But if they love the age to come and lose their life here to gain it there, then the risen, eternal Christ will deliver them unto His kingdom and glory (Gal. 1:4-5; Matt. 16:24-27; Rom. 8:17-18.)

So the dividing lines are drawn. The cross shows man's wisdom to be foolishness, his religion to be a sham, and his justice a travesty. Jew and Gentile, secular and religious – the crème de la crème of society condemned Jesus to death. Still today people line up for or against the slain Savior. Many invite a fabricated bloodless and cross-less Christianity, vainly pretending to please God by their religious ceremonies and good works. Others – most notably the Muslims – deny that Jesus died at all. Still others think He got what He deserved on the cross. In interpreting the events of the crucifixion thus, they but repeat the folly of their ancient unbelieving predecessors who brutally executed the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, many willingly come to the cross and say: “Yes. Lord, Your cross reveals how bad I am: a Christ-rejecting, hell-deserving sinner. But Your shed blood also shows that You died for my sins according to the Scriptures and you have risen again to demonstrate Your triumph to give me eternal life as a free gift. Thank you for dying for me and rising again so that I might be raised to sit in the heavenlies with You” (Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; 1 John 1:7; John 3:16.) Thanks be to God, that the cross uniquely demonstrates the Lord's perfect righteousness and love. It reveals mankind to be sinful and evil, but also reveals God to be holy, merciful, and good; the two are accurately depicted in the historic events at Calvary.

*Oh, how our inmost hearts do move
While gazing on that cross!
The death of the Incarnate Love!
What shame, what grief, what joy we prove,
That He should die for us!
Our hearts were broken by that cry,
“Eli, lama sabachthani?”*

*Worthy of death, O God, we were;
Thy judgment was our due;
In grace Thy spotless Lamb did bear
Himself our sins and guilt and shame;
Justice our surety slew,
With Him our surety we have died,
With Him we there were crucified.^{iv}*

ⁱ J.C. Ryle, “The Cross of Christ,” in *Old Paths: Being Plain Statements of Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity*. London: Charles J. Thynne, 1898, p. 256. [Italics original.]

ⁱⁱ Timothy L. Sanford, “Cross Purposes: Calvary Reveals The Passionate Heart of God.” in *Discipleship Journal, Issue 110 (March/April 1999)*. NavPress.

ⁱⁱⁱ John R.W. Stott, *Fundamentalism and Evangelism*. London: Crusade Booklets, 1956, p. 29.

^{iv} James G. Deck, “Oh, solemn hour, that hour alone” in *Spiritual Songs*, hymn #215, found here: <http://www.stempublishing.com/hymns/ss/215> Accessed on 5/18/11.