

SERENDIPITY #1 THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

I. Introduction.

A. The Old Rugged Chair.

Imagine a cult that made the electric chair their central symbol. The founder of this religion had been put to death by electrocution. Consequently, the chair became a precious symbol for them.

- They put electric chairs on top of steeples and in prominent places in their houses of worship.
- They wore little gold-plated electric chairs around their necks as jewelry.
- They sang hymns about the "old rugged chair"... "When I survey the wondrous chair"... "The glory of the chair"....

We would probably think: weird! And yet, that is exactly what happened with the cross. The followers of Christ took a symbol of shame and transformed it into a symbol of glory. How did that happen?

B. Symbol of Shame.

In the Roman Empire, no one could have imagined that the cross would ever become a cherished symbol of faith, hope and love. The cross represented:

1) Pain and suffering.

No form of execution was ever devised that was calculated to be more intensely agonizing than this! The English word *excruciating* is derived from the Latin word for cross (*crux*) and refers to severe torment.

2) Shame and humiliation.

The accused was stripped naked, beaten, whipped, marched through the streets, nailed to wood and lifted high for all to see. No humiliation was greater than this! To witness a crucifixion made one cover one's eyes.

3) Defeat and death.

The cross was final, definitive. No one survived. To be crucified was to come to the worst possible end.... every mother's worst nightmare for her son.

4) Scandal. The cross was offensive in every way.

- ... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (*SKANDALON*) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. (*I Corinthians 1:23*).

- *Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense (SKANDALON) of the cross has been abolished. (Gal. 5:11).*
- *As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall (SKANDALON), and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (Rom. 9:33).*

C. Symbol of Glory.

1) Jesus' understanding.

Jesus saw his crucifixion as a glorification (John 12:23; 13:31-32; 17:1). He believed that when he was "lifted up" to die, he was being "exalted" (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). His cross was his **throne!**

2) Paul's understanding.

When Paul was converted, his conception of the cross underwent a radical transformation! No longer did the cross symbolize:

- Weakness.... but **power**.
- Foolishness.... but **wisdom**.
- Defeat.... but **victory**.
- Condemnation.... but **salvation**.
- Death.... but **life**.
- Something of which to be ashamed.... but something **to boast about**.

Paul had made his first and most important serendipitous discovery: **the glory of the cross!**

II. The Light from the Cross.

We tend to think of the cross only in terms of salvation. However, we need to think of the cross also in terms of **revelation**. It discloses and unveils so much that before was wrapped in mystery. As we look *through* the cross (not just *at* the cross), we find light to help us understand the true nature of God, ourselves, and salvation.

A. The cross reveals the **justice / righteousness** of God.

1) Romans 3:21-26.

²¹ *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.* ²² *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,* ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴ *and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* ²⁵ *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to **demonstrate his justice**, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand*

*unpunished—²⁶ he did it to **demonstrate his justice** at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26).*

2) The divine dilemma. God has a **"problem."**

- He is full of grace and full of truth.
- He is all justice and all love.
- His justice demands that sinners be punished but His love demands that sinners be saved.
- How can he be loving without compromising His justice?
- How can he be just without compromising his love?

The cross is God's definitive response to his dilemma. Here he found a way to **justify** the **unjust** without compromising **justice**. The cross makes it possible for God to be both "just and justifier" of those who believe in him.

B. The cross reveals the love of God.

1) Romans 5:6-8.

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God **demonstrates his own love** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8).*

2) We see the depth of God's love in:

- Who he sent – not a prophet, not an angel... but **his only Son**.
- Why he sent him – not just to teach, to heal, to serve... but **to die**.
- For whom he was sent – not those who have it together... but **sinners**.

3) Other verses that speak of how the cross reveals the love of God.

- For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).
- This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. (I John 3:16).
- This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (I John 4:10-11).

4) Other religions cannot speak of the love of God because others religions have no cross! Without the cross, the Deity may express philanthropic concern or manifest benevolent condescension. But the cross reveals that God is love (I John 4:8, 16). With our God love is not just a **verb** (something God does). Love is a **noun** (what God is in his very essence)!

C. The cross reveals the wisdom and power of God.

1) I Corinthians 1:17 – 2:5.

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be **emptied of its power**. ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power of God**. ¹⁹ For it is written:

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."*

²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (skandalon) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the **power of God** and the **wisdom of God**. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.... (1:17-25).

*When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on **God's power**. (I Corinthians 2:1-5).*

2) Stumbling stone or Corner stone?

When confronted with the cross, one must choose between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God... the power of this world and the power of God. You cannot have both! A decision must be made. **Neutrality** is impossible.

The New Testament pictures the cross as a stone. Our response will determine whether the cross is a **stumbling** stone or the **corner** stone.

- *They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." ³³ As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall (SKANDALON), and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (Romans 9:32-33).*
- *⁶ For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," ⁸ and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall (SKANDALON)." (I Peter 2:6-8).*

D. The cross reveals the depth and breadth of sin.

1) A mirror.

To **see ourselves** as we truly are is a rare gift. Our egos are so inflated and our eyes are so blind that without divine help, we will never see ourselves as we truly are. We need a mirror. The cross is that mirror.

2) Christ-killers!

We may wish that the death of Jesus could be blamed solely upon Judas, Pilate, Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders... or even Satan! Alas, the Bible is clear that we too are guilty of his death. **My sins** placed him there.

- ²⁵ *All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25).*
- ²⁷ *Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." (Acts 5:27-28).*

3) It was the cross that caused Paul to come to grips with the depth of his blindness and sin. He had rejected God's promised Messiah!

³ *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. (Acts 9:3-5).*

4) When I look through (not just at) the cross, I see myself:

- I'm so **blind** I cannot see the Light of the world.
- I'm so **deaf** I can't hear the voice of God (Jesus is the Word).
- I'm so **arrogant** I will not submit to the truth.
- I'm so **stupid** I can't understand the Bible... though I try so hard.
- I'm so **rebellious** I will commit treason against my King.
- I'm so **self-absorbed** I care only about what's in it for me.
- I'm so **fickle** I'll change my position according to the wind.
- I'm so **ambitious** I'll use anyone to help me get what I want.
- I'm so **wicked** I destroy innocent people to advance my agenda.

TABLE TALK

1. How did the story of the Electric Chair Cult affect you? Have you sometimes wondered at the "weirdness" of Christians and their fixation on the cross?
2. Have you ever thought about the cross as a means of revelation? Is the cross a place of darkness or of light for you? How has today's lesson helped you to better understand:
 - the justice of God.
 - the love of God.
 - the wisdom of God.
 - the power of God.
 - the depth and breadth of your own sin.
3. Think about when you first came to understand the cross. Think about how unbelievers respond when they hear about the cross. What is the offense of the cross? Where is the scandal? What causes men to stumble?
4. What has to happen for a stumbling stone to become a corner stone? How will the cross become the key to my faith and the foundation of my hope?

III. The Cross in Galatians.

In what may be his first letter (perhaps written as early as 48 A.D.), Paul vigorously defends the true Gospel. He condemns all those who preach "a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all." (Galatians 1:6-9). This epistle teaches us that the primary characteristic of all false gospels is that the cross is **no longer central**.

In this marvelous letter, Paul reminds the Galatians of the true nature of the Gospel. The cross is not an addendum. It is the central key that interprets everything else! In this little letter, Paul makes eight affirmations about the cross¹:

A. Without the cross there is no salvation (Galatians 1:3-5).

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5).

¹ Taken in part from John Stott's book *The Cross of Christ*. InterVarsity Press. 1986. ("The Pervasive Influence of the Cross," pages 338-351).

In these opening words, Paul makes it clear that it was Jesus' act of self-giving love on the cross, that makes possible:

1) Grace and **peace**.

The cross makes possible both free and undeserved favor of God (grace) and establishes a relationship with God where sin and guilt no longer separate man from God (peace).

2) **Forgiveness** for our sins.

He died "for our sins"... in our place... bearing our guilt... receiving in himself the penalty our sins deserve...

3) **Rescue** from this evil age.

Salvation is a rescue operation. We cannot save ourselves. He delivers us from the old age and transfers us to the new age.

B. Without the cross all spiritual experience is counterfeit. (Galatians 2:19-21)

*¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ **I have been crucified** with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:19-21).*

The cross defines all spiritual experience! Paul refuses to measure spirituality by emotions, miracles, gifts of the Spirit, mystical experiences, visions, or heightened awareness. No. Authentic spiritual experiences will always be measured by how such an experience leads us to **deny self** and take up **our cross** and be crucified with him.

C. Without the cross all preaching is worthless. (Galatians 3:1-3)

*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as **crucified**. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Galatians 3:1-3).*

A preacher (or a witness) may talk about Jesus' incarnation, his teachings, his miracles and his kingdom. But if he does not make the cross central to the message... he is not announcing the Gospel.

D. Without the cross we are still under the curse. (Galatians 3:10-13)

¹⁰ All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." ¹¹ Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹² The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who

does these things will live by them. ¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming **a curse for us**, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Galatians 3:10-13).*

This may be the clearest statement in all the New Testament of **substitution**. Christ became a curse for us (v. 13). Jesus died in my place. He took the punishment on himself that my sins deserved. As a result, I am freed. Without the cross, I am still under the curse.

E. Without the cross persecution would stop. (Galatians 5:11; 6:12)

¹¹ *Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being **persecuted**? In that case **the offense (SKANDALON)** of the cross has been abolished. (Galatians 5:11).*

¹² *Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being **persecuted** for the cross of Christ. (Galatians 6:12).*

To "preach circumcision" is to preach salvation by the law, human achievement. Such a message removes the offense and scandal of the cross and appeals to human pride. The cross announces our total incapacity to save ourselves and therefore is offensive, scandalous, and a stumbling block. That is why those who preach the cross (his cross and ours) are always persecuted.

F. Without the cross we will never gain victory over sin. (Galatians 5:24; 6:14)

1) Victory over **the flesh**.

²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have **crucified the sinful nature** (the flesh) with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:24).*

The term "flesh" refers to that part of our fallen nature that is in constant conflict with God and his purposes for our lives. In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul enumerates the works of the flesh:

¹⁹ *The acts of the sinful nature (the flesh) are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21).*

We will never gain victory over these evil tendencies until the cross (both Jesus' cross and ours!) is central to our faith.

Notice that in Galatians 2:20 we have been crucified with Christ. It is something done to us. It happened to us as a result of our union with Christ. But here, in Galatians 5:24 we are being called to **crucify ourselves!**

Luther writes that Christ's people nail their flesh to the cross, "so that although the flesh be yet alive, yet it cannot perform that which it would do, forasmuch as

it is bound both hand and foot, and fast nailed to the cross.” And if we are not ready to crucify ourselves in this decisive manner, we shall soon find that instead we are “crucifying the Son of God all over again” (Hebrews 6:4-6). The essence of apostasy is changing sides from that of the crucified to that of the crucifiers. (Stott, p. 349).

2) Victory over **the world**.

¹⁴ *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been **crucified** to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14).*

Paul writes of only one cross but two crucifixions! When Paul was crucified with Christ, he died to all worldly desires, ambition and values. He knew he could not live for two kingdoms at the same time (James 4:4; I John 2:15). So he died to this world that he might live **for the world to come**.

G. Without the cross we have nothing to **boast about** (Galatians 6:14).

¹⁴ *May I never boast except in **the cross** of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14).*

Prior to his conversion, Paul boasted about his accomplishments, his ethnicity, his religion, his piety. But when he saw the cross, he realized how such boasting was vain. As a Christian, he obsessed on the cross. This was his only glory!

H. Without the cross we have no **scars** (Galatians 6:17).

¹⁷ *Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body **the marks** of Jesus. (Galatians 6:17).*

The “marks” (*stigmata*) Paul refers to are undoubtedly the wounds he had received as a follower of Christ: beatings, stonings, whippings, etc. For Paul, these marks were the **certification** of his apostleship. They were the **proof** that he was a follower of the Crucified One.

Unless the world sees in us the “marks” of self-denial and laying down our lives for others... they will not be convinced of the truth of the Gospel! They'll know we are Christians by our **scars!**

What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known

hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (II Corinthians 11:21-30).

Amy Carmichael wrote a beautiful poem that captures well what Paul is saying.

*Hast thou no scar?
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land;
I hear them hail thy bright, ascendant star.
Hast thou no scar?*

*Hast thou no wound?
Yet I was wounded by the archers; spent,
Leaned Me against a tree to die; and rent
By ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned.
Hast thou no wound?*

*No wound? No scar?
Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me.
But thine are whole; can he have followed far
Who hast no wound or scar?*

TABLE TALK

1. Paul is passionate in his condemnation of those who preach "another gospel" – a gospel where the cross is not central. Have you heard a gospel preached where the cross was not central? Describe it.
2. What about you? In your own understanding of the Gospel... and in the Gospel you share with others... Is the cross central? (His cross? Our cross?)
3. Galatians talks about one cross but two crucifixions. Have you come to the place where this second crucifixion (I have *been* crucified with Christ) is also central to your understanding of the Gospel? When and how did this occur?
4. Do you have any "scars"?

