

“When I Survey the Cross”

Jesus rode into Jerusalem with a noisy, cheering crowd following Him and lining the streets. It took immense courage for Jesus to go to the Holy City, because religious leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him, and He knew that this last trip into Jerusalem would take Him to a cross.

Isaac Watts wrote one of the great hymns of the church, a hymn about the cross of Jesus.

“When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

“Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.

“See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.”

Isaac Watts thought deeply about the majesty, the mystery, and the meaning of the cross! And when he did, it humbled his heart and stirred his soul. This is something of what the apostle Paul must have felt when *he* pondered the cross and Jesus' death on the cross: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

Have you ever “surveyed” the cross? “Surveyed” it – looked at it intently, tried to measure its meaning for your life? Think of surveyors. Their measuring instruments. How they examine intently a particular area, drawing up boundary lines. How different from somebody driving by and glancing at that property! We are familiar with crosses – jewelry, crosses on top of churches, crosses in sanctuaries. But will you take a moment with me today to *really look* at the cross of Christ and what it says to us and the world?

The first thing we might see when we survey the cross is ***the horror of our sin***. The cross was a horrible, humiliating means of execution. Where there is capital punishment today, normally there is an attempt to make it as *humane* as possible, to reduce the suffering of the criminal. Today's methods are merciful compared to execution on a cross, which was a slow, tortuous, grim way to die. Remember, this was *Jesus*, the sinless Son of God – the “Prince of Glory” – being executed! Not dying because of *His* sins – but *ours*.

Most of us today in our American culture have a rather casual view of sin. We fail to take seriously how our sin ruins and devastates life and relationships. Maxie Dunnam, in a devotional writing, says, “Cardinal Newman said, ‘Our one chance against sin is that we are shocked by it.’ If that is true, we are losing that chance, because we are no longer shocked by sin. We have become too familiar with it. Our media bill of fare – newspapers, books, magazines, television –

makes it all too common: sexual promiscuity, adultery...greed expressed in unbridled accumulation of possessions, all forms of violence and war, cheating...lying, manipulation of persons, gluttony expressed in unchecked consumption – it's all there. Our senses are bombarded by it every day, and we are convinced that not only is it 'the way things are', but the ways things *should be*."

God takes our sin seriously, because it separates us from Him, and from one another. Christ died *for all of us* – not just for the degenerate and criminally-minded, but for so-called "good people" and religious people – for we all sin! Roman soldiers physically nailed Jesus to the cross. But when we really survey the cross we see that *every sin we commit (every broken promise, every hurtful word, every act of selfishness) helped pound the nails into Jesus' hands and feet.*

When I survey the cross, I see the horror of sin – *my sin* – that helped put Jesus there. But a second thing we see when we survey the cross is ***the amazing love of God***. In the cross of Christ, God is saying to the world, "I love you! I love you!" "God so *loved* the world that He gave His only Son..."(John 3:16).

Who of us, if we are a parent, would be willing to give up our son or daughter for someone? Yet this is what it says about our heavenly Father: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). God didn't wait for us to clean up our act, or become pure (that never would have happened). He gave His Son for us while we were still sinners.

Even though Jesus never sinned, in some profound way, in hanging on the cross He identified with us in our brokenness and rebellion against God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 is an amazing verse of Scripture. "For our sake (God) made him (Jesus) to *be sin*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." An artist painted an unusual painting of Jesus on the cross. Against a darkened background, the body of Jesus stood out. But as you look closely at the picture, a second figure seems to appear in the shadows – it was as if *God* could be seen behind the figure of Jesus. The nails that went through the hands of Jesus went through the hands of God. The nail that fastened the feet of Jesus held fast the feet of God. The crown of thorns on Jesus' head was somehow on God's head, too.

Esther got bad news in the worst way. She came home late one afternoon from the beauty shop, picked up the evening paper, relaxed in a chair and glanced at the headlines. She could hardly believe what she saw: "Businessman Charged With Embezzlement" – there under the glaring headline was the name of her husband, Tom. She looked again and again in disbelief – her husband, an embezzler? Overwhelmed with shame, heartbroken and afraid, she turned to God in prayer.

When Tom came home that evening – free on bail – he threw himself at Esther's feet, and blurted out his story. He had been gambling on the quiet for years, losing more and more.

He didn't mean to steal from the company. He intended to pay it back. But finally he couldn't juggle figures any more. With his hands trembling and voice wavering, he said, "I'll have to go to prison. You'd better get a divorce and forget about me."

Esther looked deeply into Tom's eyes and said, "Listen to me. We stole this money together. We'll go to prison together, and then we'll rebuild our lives together." Tom said, "No, they can't touch you, Esther. You had nothing to do with it." Slowly she repeated the words – then Tom began to understand what his wife meant. She was identifying herself with him; though she was innocent, she was making his guilt her own. She'd be his partner through the long prison years, the suffering, helping him to bear the shame, giving him hope that they could and would begin again when this was all over.

That's what *God* did through the cross of Jesus. He identified with us in our guilt and sin, offering forgiveness, and a new life with Him that would last forever. In the cross of Jesus we see God's *holy, amazing love!*

Finally, as we survey the cross, we see not only the horror of our sin, and the amazing love of God, but we also see ***the great call and claim of God upon us.*** When we *really* begin to understand the awfulness of our sin and the awesomeness of God's love in response, it pushes us to respond. *The cross always leads to a crossroad!* Am I going to continue to live in sin and to live for myself? Or will I surrender myself and my will to the One who died for me!

Little Tommy was doing very badly in math. His parents tried everything they could think of to improve his grades: flash cards, helping with his homework, tutors, special learning centers. Nothing worked. Finally, they enrolled him in a Catholic school. After the first day, Tommy comes home with a very serious look on his face. He doesn't kiss mom hello, but heads right up to his room and starts studying. Books and papers are spread out all over his room, and he's hard at work studying. His mother is amazed. Later, she calls him down to dinner and to her shock, the minute he's done eating he marches back to his room without a word, hitting the books again.

This goes on for some time and all the while, mom's trying to figure out what happened. Fearing that she'll ruin a good thing, she doesn't say much about it. The day comes for Tommy to bring home his first report card from Catholic school. Quietly he lays it on the table and goes up to his room to hit the books. With a great deal of trepidation, she opens it, and much to her surprise, Tommy got an A in math!

At this point her curiosity is about to burst. She goes to his room and says, "Tommy, what was it that changed your math scores? Was it the nuns? "No!" Tommy says. "Well, what was it then? Was it the discipline? The uniforms? The new teacher?" Tommy looked at her and said, "Well, on the first day of school, when I saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I knew they weren't fooling around." *Jesus, hanging on the cross, has the power to change us!*

In light of all God has done for me in Christ, will I turn from sin and self-centered living (which is what sin is), and dedicate myself to God's will and purposes? This is what Isaac Watts

experienced and speaks of in his hymn: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my life, my soul, my all.”

When I was still young and in my teenage years, it was the cross that won my heart and awakened me to God’s claim on my life. During my college years I was preaching regularly, then became pastor of a small church. While others my age were going to fraternity parties and just having fun, I was trying to balance my studies and serve a small church while preparing for the ordained ministry. Needless to say, it was difficult. Often I was tempted to quit, to serve myself and chart my own selfish course. During that period of my life there were times when I would go into my home church when no one else was there, sit in the empty sanctuary, look at the cross on the altar and meditate on what God had done for me in that cross. These times of surveying the cross would lift my spirits, and rekindle my devotion to the Lord.

An archbishop of Paris, standing in the pulpit of the famed Notre Dame Cathedral, said that 30 years before, 3 young tourists had come into that great cathedral. They were rough, rude, cynical young men who scoffed at Christianity. Two of them had dared the third to go into the confession booth and make up a mock confession. They bet he wouldn’t have the nerve. Well, he did. But the old priest hearing the confession saw through this young man’s arrogance and deceit, and said, “Very well, my son, every confession requires a penance. I ask you to go into the chapel, stand before the crucifix, look into the face of the crucified Christ, and say, ‘all this you did for me, and I don’t care a damn.’

The young man swaggered out of the confessional to claim the bet, but the other 2 men insisted before he was paid that he would have to do the penance the old priest had demanded. So, he went into the chapel, looked into the face of Christ, and began, “All this you did for me, and I.....”. He never finished the sentence, for in that moment there he began a painful experience that changed his life, and led him to surrender himself to God.

The archbishop telling the story leaned over the pulpit, and said, “That young man is the same person who stands before you preaching today.”

When we look at the cross, when see our sin and the amazing love of God, can you and I still look into the face of Jesus and say, “All this you did for me, and I don’t care a damn”?

“Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

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