

Cross Purposes

Calvary Reveals The Passionate Heart Of God.

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"In the cross is salvation; in the cross is life; in the cross is protection against our enemies; in the cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the cross is strength of mind; in the cross is joy of spirit; in the cross the sum of all virtue; in the cross perfection of holiness."

So wrote Thomas à Kempis as he attempted to drive home the importance of the cross.

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. Many religions have great teachers. Some have great martyrs. However, none but Christianity has a cross. 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. Gandhi, the great Hindu leader, couldn't bring himself to accept Jesus as anything more than a martyr. It's no different today.

How can something so despised and rejected—an execution tool and a dying God—be the axis around which the entire universe rotates?

Revelations of God's Heart

To understand the cross is to understand God. For it was God's naked essence—His very soul—that hung open and vulnerable on a physical cross 2,000 years ago. To stare at the cross is to get the clearest, deepest look into the heart of God. And if I dare look, what will I see? What aspect of the Almighty will I experience that I can't from any other vantage? What will stir in my heart if I linger in stillness before the cross?

A Heart of Holiness

As I gaze at the cross, I discover that it reveals the gravity of my sin. In the cross I see God's standard—the perfection and sinlessness He demands of me. I also see how absolutely short I fall in trying to measure up to His standard. Sin—not a common word these days—is missing the mark, by an inch or a mile, as a murderer in the ghetto or as a gossip in the fellowship hall. It is any unrighteousness. It is any transgression from the established code. It is any lawless deed.

It's one thing to see God's holiness. It's even harder to see that same holiness reject every shred of sin in my heart. Big or little, He hates it. Black or "gray," He abhors it. His holy nature cannot tolerate any unrighteousness. When my sin was laid on the shoulders of Jesus that dark afternoon on Golgotha, God turned His head away. Jesus' cry, "Why have you forsaken me?" drives home the truth. Even His own Son had to be shunned because of the sin He took onto His body for me. God isn't melodramatic; He simply cannot and will not tolerate sin. If He rejected His Son because of the sin on His shoulders, He rejects me as well.

But there's another side of God's holiness, a comforting side that has taken me years to understand. While I'm here on earth, people will hurt me with their sinful actions. But in the cross, there's a guarantee that someday I will be safe from all evil. No one will be allowed to dominate me, manipulate me, abuse me, or hurt me. Someday Christ's own nail-pierced hand will wipe the tears from my eyes. Someday **"there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain"** ([Rev. 21:4](#)). Someday His holy presence will make a safe place for me. This world isn't a safe place—for bodies, hearts, or souls. But I long for that time and place when I can finally be safe. Someday will come, I know it. His cross and His holiness guarantee it.

A Heart of Love

Sin is an ugliness God cannot look upon. The Old Testament writers speak of God having to turn His face from the wickedness of His people. So when that same God reaches down in love, it's the craziest love ever demonstrated. I call it "crazy" because that's exactly what it is. His love is unidirectional, limitless, and unchanging. There's no way I can reach the end of His mercy. His love reached out to me first, when I was headed in the opposite direction. No matter how bad a day or month I'm having, I can't stop Him from loving me. He took the pain in my place. His love can never be taken away from me even though it was given to me when I was unworthy of it. Where else will I receive such love? There is no other place.

I have argued with God and told Him how unworthy I really am. I fight His love sometimes, even in light of all the theology I have memorized. I'm a missionary. I know all the verses, I know all the Sunday school answers, but I still struggle to understand how a holy God can love me. It has been the cross that continually brings me to tears, proving to me over and over again that I am loved, imperfect

as I am. It's because of the cross that I'm able to believe there really is nothing that can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus ([Romans 8:38–39](#)). God's crazy love shines through every splinter of the cross. It's strange. It's curious. It's aimed at me. It's scary. It's God's heart—a heart broken to death, not killed by a Roman spear. I can't look at the cross without hearing it scream out, "I love you!"

A Heart of Power

Along with God's holiness and love, the cross also shows me God's ruthless power. In one violent act, He crushed His greatest enemy, Satan. During His earthly ministry, Jesus cast out many evil spirits—sometimes one, sometimes many. On the cross He took on the prince of the power of the air and every dark one under him and overpowered them all. Through apparent defeat, He secured the ultimate victory. By being "weak," He powerfully consumed all the armies of the adversary.

With all the powers of evil arrayed against Him, Jesus never wavered from the master plan—a plan explained in [Col. 2:13–15](#) where Paul writes,

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

In this one moment in time, Jesus surrendered His life, reclaimed it three days later, returned to heaven, and **"sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"** ([Hebrews 12:2](#)).

Call Him weak. Call Him unbelievable. Call Him crazy. But my Jesus bows to no one! He's not just the "good" half of the good-and-evil struggle. He is God alone. He is ruler over all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. The cross is where light clashed with darkness, and when Easter morning came, only the light remained.

In my counseling duties, I have worked with people who have come from occult backgrounds or have been in direct contact with demonic forces. Often on their behalf, I'm called to engage in intense spiritual warfare. When that happens, all the words spoken, all the prayers uttered, and all the commands given hinge on this decisive battle that Jesus Christ won on the cross. I know it and cling to it. It's not theory; it's reality. The dark ones know it, too, and attempt to circumvent it. Light and dark, we both know the power of the cross. It's a reminder of God's great authority over evil and every evil spirit. It's a reminder that the clients before me can, and do, belong to Christ, not Satan—no matter what the past, no matter what was signed, vowed, or chanted. They can be free of Satan's grip forever because of the cross. That is the cross I see. That is the cross I've come to know and cherish.

The Cross and Me

As Western believers we're accustomed to looking at the Scriptures in a "what's in it for me" mode. So as I gaze at the cross, I'm eventually prone to wonder: What is the cross to me?

Such a mindset ultimately proves foolish, for if I approach the cross with an open heart, it will do something *to* me, not just *for* me. The cross is not my spiritual servant. It's not a mere icon. It's a spiritual scalpel. This, too, is part of the utter power the cross embodies.

To be sure, *the cross will kill me*. Kill me? How? It will kill the persona of "me" that I've fashioned for the world and that I have come to believe is the true me. Call it "dying to self" or whatever you want, but the cross will kill me. It is an instrument of death. It killed Jesus; it will kill me, too.

You see, I can never approach the cross and walk away unchanged. The cross will break me or harden me. My faith will grow or my defiance will. Sometimes the change is profound and noticeable. At other times it's subtle and goes undetected. I can't enter the presence of Jesus' cross and be the same when I depart.

Why would any right-thinking person embrace a cross that demands his or her death? Because the cross that is an instrument of death is also an instrument of new life. The life it gives is described with words such as *justification*, *atonement*, and *reconciliation*. We may know the rhetoric, but when was the last time we really gazed at the cross and asked what those words mean?

Declared Innocent

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God" ([Romans 5:1](#)). The cross justifies me. It acquits me of all my transgressions. This holy, powerful God wipes my list of debts clean and declares me right, innocent, and holy. I can cover my sins, deny them, and even try to run from them, all the while pretending to live. But only in the cross can I be delivered from their death penalty.

God's law demanded perfection. I failed. The sentence was death. Jesus accepted the execution in my place. Now, because of the cross, I leave the courtroom free—acquitted and holy in the eyes of the Judge who once condemned me.

Clean Clear Through

Throughout the history of the human race, men have had an internal urge for cleansing and forgiveness. They have gone to great lengths and sacrificed much to gain peace of mind and a sense of being purged. Religions the world over require a sacrifice from the follower that must be performed again and again. The

cross is the only cleansing agent that originates from God and performs a once-and-for-all cleansing of the believer.

My sin is the albatross that hangs around my neck. Wherever I go, it follows. And I will never be truly free from my wretched self until I come face to face with the cross. The cross cleanses me from the inside out. It plunges me deep into its grain and purges all the transgressions I have amassed over the years.

"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" ([Psalm 51:7](#)). What once was detestable to a holy God—and to my own self—is now desirable. The cross changes me forever. I am totally clean and restored—forever.

I love the words of the **Robert Lowry** hymn **"Nothing but the Blood."**

*What can wash away my sins?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*Oh, precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow.
No other fount I know.
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Nowhere but at the foot of the cross can a guilty sinner like me be washed white as snow.

Intimacy Restored

Since I am declared innocent and cleansed by the cross, God can reach out and pull me close to Him. I am wanted! I was wanted as His child when I was still in my mother's womb. Now He wants me again, as His friend. That is the whole reason for the cross—to reconcile me with my heavenly Father. **"But we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" ([Romans 5:11](#)).** Though I may be rejected by family, friends, and others, I am not—and never will be—rejected by God.

Not only did the Judge declare me righteous, not only did the Priest declare me cleansed and forgiven, but the Father now declares me His friend. A friend to walk with. A friend to tell His heart to. A friend to help in time of trouble. I can be a friend, a kindred spirit, a soul mate of the Almighty!

The cross has set a place at God's table for me. I'm in the inner circle. I can have intimacy with God. This is the kind of friendship God wants and extends to me. I belong. All because of the cross.

Come to the Cross

Through the years, the cross has been my anchor in stormy times. It has been the shield I hid behind when all hell broke loose against me. It's the Excalibur with which I have destroyed fears and lies and cast out evil spirits. It's my birth certificate that continually reminds me of who I am and to whom I belong.

What is the cross to you? Is it polished wood or jewelry? Is it a grand idea or an event you visit on communion Sunday? Is it God's very heart that you touch often? Is it a place you frequent and where you are deeply changed?

Come to the cross with me—again or for the first time ever. We often need the physical symbol to remind us of the spiritual truth. Whether in a sanctuary or in the solitude of your devotional time, find a visual symbol of the cross. Sit alone in silence before it. Do nothing but sit, look, and listen. Let the God who once hung on that cross speak. Work to quiet your thoughts; be still and silent—in voice and in thought. Take time to look, to cherish, and to embrace the old rugged cross.