

The Power of the Cross

Tony Ling

1. The Masterstroke of History

Some years ago, following a public meeting at which I had been speaking, I was met by an irate member of the congregation. “What you need,” said the face behind the pointing finger “is less of this triumphalism and more preaching of the cross.” I was being taken to task again for daring to declare that the church of God was destined to win in the world.

God does sometimes send someone across our path specifically to bring a word of correction or insight, and I’ve never dismissed such encounters lightly. How then was I to react to this latest confrontation? Was I missing something fundamental? Did I need a radical reappraisal of my doctrinal position? As I pondered, another question forced its way into my thinking, “Why do so many see a conflict between a declaration of triumph and the centrality of the cross?”

The cross on which Jesus died was man-made. The time and place of its use can be broadly located historically and geographically. Yet the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ towers gloriously above all other temporal things in this space-time world, as the universal and eternal declaration of God’s love and the chosen means of accomplishing all his purposes.

The actual, material cross has, of course, long since turned to dust even though the medieval church claimed enough relics of the ‘true cross’ to rebuild Noah’s Ark! Furthermore, death by crucifixion was not a mode of capital punishment reserved exclusively for Jesus. History tells the bloody story of thousands before and after him who suffered a similar fate.

But on *this* cross hung God’s own Son; from this Son flowed God’s own blood; (1) and with this blood was purchased God’s own people (2). Divorced from the one who died there, the cross itself is meaningless. But consistently through the New Testament ‘the cross’ is a synonym of the redemptive work of the Son of God.

From a merely human point of view the gap between the Cross of Christ and the purposes of God is unbridgeable. The pompous religious man, secure in the legalisms of his dead tradition, recoils from the cross. To him it is offensive; an affront to his own self-righteousness. The intellectual humanist, is sickened by the cross, dismissing the idea of salvation through the blood of Christ as abhorrent and primitive, totally illogical and utterly foolish.

Yet for those who experience the work of the cross in their lives, the crucified Jesus is the wisdom and power of God (3). It is as if, with arms cruelly stretched along a rough hewn beam, Jesus with one hand grasped the hand of his holy Father and with the other reached out to sinful humanity, and in himself, brought us together.

In one act he took our sin and God's wrath and reconciled us in peace and love. Faith enables us to imagine again those nail pierced hands, willingly grasping shame and deep humiliation and yet opened to receive unsurpassed glory; broken and bruised in extreme weakness, while trembling on the brink of touching unmatched power; bloodied and convulsed in agonised suffering but pointing with faith to inexpressible joy. At one-and-the-same time the cross was the experience of cold, stark death, and the expectation of never ending life; the place of apparent defeat was the place of total victory. What to natural perception was weakness and failure played out to the full in utter horror, was, in the mystery of God, the masterstroke of history. Eric Sauer has said:

“The cross is the greatest event in the history of salvation, greater even than the resurrection. The cross is the victory, the resurrection the triumph ... The resurrection is the public display of victory, the triumph of the Crucified One”
(4)

The preaching of the cross is the preaching of ‘Christ Victorious’. The preaching of Christ crucified is nothing less than a recounting of his conquest. Calvary was the battle ground that decides forever the outcome of the war; the guarantee of heaven's triumph.

The blood shed on that cross is the antidote that covers all the ills of the universe. For by it God has reconciled *all things* to himself; things in heaven and on earth (5). Our expectation of triumph is based on the eternal truth that the price of victory has been paid. The blood of Jesus has been shed. That same foundation of faith is the ground upon which we stand to translate our expectation of triumph into our experience of victory.

2. A Crucified King

When we look back to the cross with eyes opened by biblical revelation, we see with vivid reality these things that were hidden from eyes which saw only the suffering and death of a man named Jesus.

Certainly, some watched him die as an innocent victim of religious spite and envy, and of political intrigue. Others, however, gloated at his anguish, and were glad to see the back of one they considered to be a blasphemous trouble maker.

All of them, of course, saw the cross, the nails, the blood. They all saw the inscription, the thorns, the spear wound. All heard his words, his prayers, his cries. But none saw or understood what was really happening.

Fixed to the cross, above the head of Jesus, was a notice the gospels call ‘*the charge against him*’. It read ‘*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*’ It was the world's accusation but it has become the church's confession. That which evil men charged him with, the redeemed cheer him with. During his ministry, the Pharisees had denigrated him as a ‘friend of sinners’, but that was just what God had sent him to be, and as such we joyfully receive him. At the cross the world called him ‘king’, and so he is. And to him we gladly bow the knee.

The notice was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. It was written in Hebrew, the language of God's revelation, of salvation history, of prophetic expectation, because here hung the one of whom all the law and the prophets had spoken. Here was one suffering in order to enter in his glory – passing through the torture chamber of earth so as to enter the throne room of heaven. The ultimate prophetic voice had spoken, the final blood sacrifice made, the last legal demand satisfied.

It was written in Latin, the language of Imperial Rome, the 'master-race' that held the world in its power. For here hung one whose weakness was greater than Rome's might and whose kingdom was destined to surpass it in its advance and endurance. From all mankind, it was about to create a supernatural race of redeemed humanity.

It was written in Greek, the language of the philosopher and the **sage**. Beneath this sign hung one whose foolishness exceeded their wisdom, and in whom an unanswerable logic and eternal truth dwelt. He unmasked the wisdom of this world and exposed it as sinful arrogance. And in doing so, he opened the way to true wisdom to all who believe in him.

It was written in languages that all could read, so that all might know that 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.' (6)

3. The Cosmic Curse

Upon the head of the crucified one was a crown. It was not a royal diadem to show his true worth, for none would be sufficient. Even in the glory of heaven he must be crowned with '*many crowns*'. (7) It was not a paper crown, a foolish imitation and an added indignity. It was not a floral crown, so often used in pagan rituals to adorn the sacrifice. This was a cruel crown. A crown of thorns designed to inflict more pain and spill more blood. But the cruelty and ignorance of men once again served the sovereign purposes of God. For here, that all might see, the Saviour took upon himself the curse that had permeated all creation when Adam sinned:

"Cursed is the ground because of you ... It will produce thorns and thistles for you ..." (8)

From the moment God spoke these words, "*the whole creation has been groaning*" (9), anxiously awaiting liberation from its bondage to decay. The cosmic curse was placed upon Jesus, and the blood that soaked the ground, spoke to the ground saying creation itself will be brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (10)

The liberty is yet to come. The restoration of all things has not yet happened. The ultimate revelation of the children of God is still to be seen. But the certainty is secured, because the blood has been shed.

4. The Sins of the Whole World

It is not just the *repercussions* of sin that are confronted by the cross. It deals with sin itself. Not some nebulous *idea* of sin; but *actual* sin. Sinful attitudes that fill the heart and sinful acts that guide the hand. Sin that wrecks lives, ruins relationships, gives birth to violence, fosters greed, harbours hatred and created deep pits of depravity.

Dark things of which we dare not speak; foolish things that we wish we did not do. The haunting sense of utter helplessness and the arrogant pride of self-righteousness. The futile pursuit of false religions and the empty chase after elusive pleasures. These and countless others are the sinful symptoms of a fallen humanity. Even if we were to persuade ourselves that we were ‘symptom free’, the insidious virus is in us, for the Bible says *“all have sinned”* (11) – and in the end the disease will kill, *“for the wages of sin is death”* (12).

Above this heaving mass of darkened spirits, shattered emotions and hostile minds stands the cross of Jesus, where, *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”*. (13) Jesus ‘became sin’ as the accumulated sins of all persons in all places at all times were piled upon him. *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”* says John, *“and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”*. (14) The cost of every sin, yours and mine, was paid for by the more than sufficient sacrifice of Jesus. Calvary has become the legal ground upon which we now stand in continual victory over the power of sin. The cross is not the casual offer of a chance to have another go at living right. It provides the power to stop wrong living. It removes the inherited bias to sin we are all born with and replaces it with a bias to righteousness. For the Christ who was made to be sin for us is the one in whom we now become the righteousness of God:

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness” (15)

As we look to the cross, we can see ourselves dying with Jesus in his death, and so dying to sin itself and to the awful hold it has on our lives:

“Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin” (16)

5. Nailed to the Cross

Pilate was not the only one to fix a notice to the cross of Jesus. There was another of equal if not greater significance. It was unread because it was unseen. It was nailed there by God himself:

“Having cancelled 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”. (17)

Jesus, in his death, is the end of the law. Not that the law was bad. But it set a standard of holiness that men had always found unreachable. It played a unique and essential role in the purposes of God by first **identifying sin**:

“I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (18)

and then by **isolating sin**:

“... so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful” (19)

What the law said I should not do became the very thing I wanted to do more than any other. Nor could I excuse myself now by explaining away my behaviour as a ‘problem’, an area of ‘challenge’ or an ‘orientation’. It was sin. Paul explained how sin used the law to bring deceptions (20) arouse evil desires (21) and produce spiritual death (22). The law itself was good. But Christ had to die and therefore the law had proved inadequate:

“If righteousness could be gained by the law, Christ died for nothing” (23)

Now all this is just part of a complex theological argument the apostle uses to make Christians understand that their relationship with God does not depend on religious observances. Gone are the needs for special days and special diets. No more ceremonies and rituals. Away with ‘holy’ clothes and mournful meetings. Legalism was put to death at Calvary for Jesus abolished *“in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (24)*

Jesus taught that life comes from the Holy Spirit and that his words were Spirit and life (25). *“The letter kills”* says Paul, *“but the Spirit gives life” (26)*. The cross puts to death ‘dead letter religion’ and liberates us into the life of the Spirit:

“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (27).

6. Fallen Empires

It was at the cross the demonic powers and authorities were put to shame; and the forces of darkness were forever stripped of their assumed rule and were toppled from thrones they had usurped.

Paul tells us that if the *“rulers of this age”* had understood the wisdom of God – which he demonstrated by giving Jesus to shed his blood and so redeem mankind – *“they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (28)*. Paul knew that he was speaking hypothetically, because in reality the ‘rulers’ had no choice. The Ruler of all things had determined to save us by the cross. Jesus died according to *“God’s set purpose and foreknowledge” (29)* and part of that set purpose was to use the rulers of this age – to set them up – to be the instruments of achieving his will.

Psalm 22 is a remarkable prophecy full of references to the cross of Jesus where all the principle players are mentioned. It records the anguished prayer of the Son: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* It speaks of the taunts that wicked men hurled at him: *“He trusts in the Lord, let the Lord rescue him”*. It points to the soldiers stealing his clothes: *“They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing”*. It also contains references to the innocent sufferer surrounded by ‘strong bulls’, ‘roaring lions’ and ‘powerful dogs’. This could well be a vivid picture of the forces of evil that hounded Jesus to the cross and closed in for the kill. But no one, man or demon, could take this life. *“No one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord” (30)*. Jesus said, and now demonstrated it to the rebellious powers. The hoards of darkness were being confronted by a shocking realisation – they were cruci-

ying him but not killing him, and as he was laying down his life he was pulling down their empire:

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross”. (31)

The cross is the end of demonic authority. It is the collapse of its sway; the overthrow of its kingdom. On the cross Jesus pulled the teeth of the roaring lions, broke the horns of the strong bulls, muzzled the dogs and put them on a very short lead.

“Christ’s death and resurrection deprived the evil forces of any effective power against himself or the members of his body, the church No longer can these powers exert their compelling influence over people whom Christ has claimed for himself.” (32)

The power of the cross means that you can live free from the fear and influence of demonic power.

7. The Strong Man Bound

Not only were the powers of darkness disarmed, Satan was defeated. From the day the serpent had entered the garden to deceive the woman and cause the man to sin, a word hovered over creation. It was a word containing curse and blessing; threat and promise. It was God’s word to his enemy and fallen humanity:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.” (33)

The promise and the blessing was for fallen humanity. The threat and the curse for the devil. Both were fulfilled at the cross.

John tells us that Jesus appeared *“to destroy the devil’s work”* (34) and in the gospels that is exactly what we find Jesus doing. The miracles and ministry of Jesus were like preliminary bouts between unmatched protagonists. Each contest heading for the last fight and the final round. Every previous encounter Jesus had decisively won on points. The last would seal his victory with a knock-out. Each defeat that Satan experienced was a bitter foretaste of his final destruction.

During one of his confrontations, Jesus explained his fight plan:

“How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house” (35)

Luke puts it this way:

“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoil” (36)

What Jesus’ ministry began, his cross completed.

- Firstly, he reduced Satan's authority. The cross was a *strategy*. Jesus was on the offensive. It was he who attacked. The cross was a *subduing*, for one stronger than the strong man was here. The cross was a *stripping*, for the strong man's armour was taken away. The cross was a *shaming*, for the devil's grounds of confidence were removed.
- Secondly he restricted Satan's power. The cross was the ultimate in *breaking into* the strong man's house. It was the decisive *binding up* of the strong man's strength. It was the glorious *bringing out* of the strong man's 'possessions' – the multitudes who had been held in his power. Satan's armour has gone and his arms are bound!

“He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (37)

The cross transforms death into a servant of God who ushers the believer into the presence of Jesus. The cross transforms the believer into a servant of God who by the power of Jesus resists the devil and sees him flee.

No more anxiety, terror or tyranny. The crucified has conquered.

8. Made Whole

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... and by his wounds we are healed” (38)

Chapter 53 of Isaiah is universally recognised as a prophecy of the redemptive suffering of the Servant of the Lord. When Philip the evangelist encountered an Ethiopian dignitary travelling home from Jerusalem, he found the man reading this chapter. *“Who is the prophet talking about”* the Ethiopian asked *“himself or someone else?”* Philip grasped the opportunity and *“began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (39)*

Not only does this whole chapter of Isaiah point to Jesus, but verses 4 and 5 quoted above specifically refer to his healing ministry.

“When evening came, many who were demon possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah : He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases” (40)

Peter takes the same scripture and looking back to the finished work of the cross, declares, *“by his wounds you were healed”*. (41) The good news about Jesus includes the wondrous truth that he who *“went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil”* (42) is still healing today. There is health through his hurts and wholeness through his wounds inflicted at Calvary.

Many have sought to dismiss the fact that the cross – which was suffering and sickness to Jesus – can be physical comfort and cure for believers. But the prophetic dec-

laration and the apostolic application leave little room for doubt. Scripture often links the concept of forgiveness and healing.

The psalmist cried, *“Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases”* (43)

Jesus asked the question: *“which is easier: to say to the paralytic, Your sins are forgiven; or to say, Get up, take your mat and walk?”* (44) And, of course he did both!

Significantly, Paul told the Corinthian church that its wrong attitude at the Lord’s table and its lack of appreciation of his body caused weakness, sickness and death among the members. (45) Now this explicit pronouncement carries with it an implicit promise: that a right attitude and appreciation produces strength, health, and life – and these are freely dispensed at the feast celebrating the covenant made in his shed blood and proclaiming the death of his broken body on the cross.

Upon the cross were piled our sins. Upon the cross were heaped our sicknesses.

9. Provision From Poverty

While thinking of the physical benefits released to us through the cross, we must also consider another area of benefit that appears to be more material than spiritual.

When Abraham was on his way to sacrifice his son, Isaac asked the question his father was probably dreading: *“where is the lamb...?”* With a confession of faith that scaled new heights and a prophetic declaration that spanned all ages, he replied, *“God himself will provide the lamb ...”* (46) From that day the place where Abraham raised an altar and where God revealed a substitute, was called; *“The Lord will Provide”*. One of the ways in which God calls us to know him is as The Lord, our Provider.

Abraham’s offering up of his son is an Old Testament picture of a New Testament fulfillment. God provided Jesus – the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – as a substitute for us all. His provision did not stop there.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church to encourage its participation in an offering to meet a pressing need, he gives the great example of the churches in Macedonia. Their *“extreme poverty”* had *“welled up in rich generosity”*. He then reminds them of the supreme example:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”. (47)

It is impossible to escape the fact that Paul is dealing with finance in this passage and uses monetary terms when speaking of Christ’s work on the cross. Through the cross Jesus became the depository of all God’s glorious riches, and the means by which all our needs may be met. (48)

The cross is not a get-rich-quick gimmick. It does stand, however, as a statement of intent from God. It says, *“I will provide”*.

The Macedonian Christians must have experienced miraculous provision when they “welled up in rich generosity” (49) out of their apparent poverty. Perhaps Paul had taught them what he wrote to the Romans:

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things” (50)

Poverty is not good news. But we are called to preach good news to the poor. What kind of news is good news to those with nothing? Surely this: “*God has sent his Son who on the cross has met all your needs.*”

10. A Holy Nation

Reviewing all that has been said so far we confidently conclude that the cross demonstrates a love that knew no limits, making a gift that had no equal, to a world that had no hope.

“God so loved the WORLD that he gave...” (51)
presents the universality of the cross; its arms outstretched to embrace all.

“The Son of God who loved ME and gave” (52)
presents the individuality of the cross; its shadow falling on you alone.

But there is another vital aspect of the cross:

“Christ loved the CHURCH and gave” (53)
presents us with what can best be called the corporeity of the cross.

Jesus said, “*But I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself*” (54). Calvary is the hill that has become the levelling ground for all kinds and conditions; all races and languages of mankind. The way of the cross is the exclusive rite of passage into the church.

Jesus also said, “*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*”. (55)

Lifted up from the earth he draws all men, falling into the ground he transforms all men. What a man sows he also reaps, and the harvest of Jesus is a multitude of men and women just like him. At the foot of the cross we stand on one plane, and at the foot of the cross we become one people; “*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God*” (56)

We are familiar with the incident of the curtain, when the veil of the temple, was torn. But what of the demolished wall? Paul describes it in Ephesians. Speaking of the huge barricade between Jews and Gentiles, he says that Jesus, “*has made the two (Jew and Gentile) one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two ... and ... to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.*” (57) The curtain is torn to bring us to God. The wall is destroyed to bring us to each other.

The cross is an axe laid to the root of national superiority. The cross is a hammer driving the nails into the coffin lid of racial favouritism. The cross demands, “*no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.*” (58)

The passage in Ephesians that tells us Christ died for the church also tells us that the church he came to purchase for himself is the bride he will present to himself. (59) Now the Lord is not a bigamist. He does not have a Jewish bride and a Gentile bride. Neither does he have a black bride and a white bride. What is more, he does not have a Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist or Pentecostal bride. The cross that leaves no room for “Christian” nationalism, allows no ground for “Christian” racism, stands yet to confront the shame of Christian denominationalism. But it stands also as an immovable hope that the prayer of Jesus “*that all of them may be one*” (60) will be answered. The warts and wrinkles will be removed, for the bride price has been paid and the bridegroom is coming again.

11. Life Through the Cross

Someone will ask, “If all this is true, why am I as I am. And how can an event of 2,000 years ago have an effect on my life today?”

Undoubtedly the cross is an historic fact, but it demands a response of faith. Faith is not just *belief* that the cross was real, it is a confidence that it was really for me. Martin Luther pictured the cross as a marriage in which the two partners become one, and all that one has becomes the property of the other (61). What was ours – sin and all its symptoms – became Christ’s, and what is his – blessing and all its benefits – became ours. But we must enter into the marriage; we must embrace the cross, and as with all marriages, we must accept its demands and responsibilities. We enter, with a whole heart and total life, into a relationship that is without charge but that will cost all that we have.

“Jesus said, “If anyone will come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”” (62)

While the cross is for us an invitation, not an imposition, Christian discipleship is impossible without a positive response to its demands. In another place Jesus said we must take up the cross daily (63) and Paul described his own life as dying daily (64) facing death all day long (65) and always carrying in his body the death of Jesus (66). Clearly, the effective dosage of the medicine of the cross is ‘once a day, every day, all day long.’ Paul put it this way, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me*”. (67)

There is a popular song which I like a lot. It is not a psalm, hymn or spiritual song. It is a love song written by someone called McBroom and it is called “The Rose”. A verse from this song says:

‘It’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance,
It’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance,

It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to give,
And the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.' (68)

It seems to me to somehow capture the dilemma of the challenge to real living. I must 'break' before I 'dance' and 'die' before I 'live'. Jim Elliot, a young missionary killed in Ecuador in 1956 lived by this motto, 'he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.' That is the attitude of the cross.

The cross is the place of my death and the promise of my life. It is the holy ground that demands I lay down my life, and the guarantee that I will take it up again in newness, holiness and power. I have exchanged a life that cannot last for one that cannot end.

My questionable ambition, my selfish ideas, my fickle preferences, my imagined ability, my, my, my, is done to death. His life has come alive in me, and nothing can ever be the same again.

Living his life I can lay it down in preference of and care for my friends, (69) for my brothers, (70) for my family (71) and for the advance of the gospel. (72)

"'May I never boast' says Paul, 'except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world'." (73)

What power! In the cross the world loses its attraction, Satan his power, demons their influence, and the climax of history is determined. In the cross I have lost my sin, my fear and my hopelessness.

In this cross we may boast. And by this cross we live.