

# A Closer Look at the Cross

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. Galatians 6:14

In the verse above, the Paul the Apostle reveals his attitude about the cross of Christ. Paul viewed the cross, which seems on the face of it to be a place of great humiliation and shame, as an event in which he could glory. As we look at the details of what the cross demonstrated and its importance in God's plan of reconciliation and redemption, we should join Paul in glorying in the cross.

## **The Centrality of the Cross**

In the book of Ephesians, Paul reveals the dimensions of God's grace as it is expressed in the mystery message that was revealed to and through him.

That Christ may dwell in your heart by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Ephesians 3:17-19

Notice that Paul gives us four different dimensions of God's grace: length, breadth, depth, and height. At the center of each of those dimensions is the cross.

Paul starts by describing the breadth of God's grace. God's grace is broad enough to reach to the entire universe. God's plan is to reconcile all heaven and earth, the entire breadth of creation, unto Himself.

And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth or things in heaven. Colossians 1:20

And being found in fashion as a man he [Christ] humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9-11

It is important to note that the reference here to reconciliation is not synonymous with salvation. Paul is not teaching that every creature in heaven and earth will be saved. He is teaching that the heaven and earth will be brought back under the rule of God through Jesus Christ and that every creature in heaven and earth will acknowledge that authority. This is clearly the explanation given in Philippians 2. Both of the passages above make

clear that the means by which God accomplishes this goal, the center of His broad plan of reconciliation, is the cross.

Next, Paul speaks of the length of God's grace. God's grace is everlasting. The plan of reconciliation and redemption that God's grace conceived stretches from eternity past to eternity future.

Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began; Titus 1:1,2

Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: Ephesians 1:9,10

Notice that by comparing the two passages above we see the entire expanse of God's plan of reconciliation and redemption. It is a plan that was conceived in the mind of God "before the world began" and will be fulfilled when time is ended, "in the dispensation of the fulness of times". At the very heart of God's plan, which reaches to all time and eternity, is the cross.

We will consider the last two dimensions that Paul mentions as a set; they are depth and height. In order for God to display His grace, Jesus Christ was required to make a journey from the highest heights of heaven to the lowest depths of hell and back again.

Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) Ephesians 4:8-10

Paul's account from Ephesians gives us a clear picture of the depth and height to which Christ went to fulfill God's plan of reconciliation and redemption. At the center of this journey is a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem.

As we can see from the passages above, the cross is at the center of all that God has done. Without the cross, none of what God has accomplished for us would have been possible. That cross is truly the center of God's work and as such, it towers far above all else in importance.

## **The Glory of the Cross**

One of the purposes of the cross was to show forth God's glory. In that place of ultimate humiliation, we see the

glory of God shining through.

The Bible defines God's glory as being the essence of who He is. God's glory is His character and nature. When Moses asked God to see his glory, the Lord revealed the truth of His character and nature.

And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. Exodus 34:5-8

When Jesus Christ was on this earth as God incarnate, He manifested God's glory by demonstrating God's characteristics of grace and truth.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. John 1:14

While God is a God that forgives iniquity and transgression, and sin, he will by no means clear the guilty. God is a God of great grace, but He is also a God of truth that cannot simply overlook sin. On the cross, we see these two great characteristics of God, which seem to be at odds, perfectly demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ.

The cross is a place of great judgment where the truth of God's justice is revealed in all its fury. The twenty-second Psalm gives us a taste of this awful judgment.

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded. But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. Psalms 22:1-6

But the cross is also a place of great grace where the longsuffering and mercy of God is put on display for the entire universe to see. Paul's writings make this clear.

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; Romans 3:24,25

For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. Ephesians 2:14-17

So, in the cross we truly do see both elements of God's

glory, His truth and His grace. God's truth is seen in the fact that He did not simply overlook man's sin, but rather He reckoned that sin to another, to Jesus Christ. His grace is seen in the fact that Jesus Christ was willing to have our sin reckoned to His account and pay the penalty that we deserved to pay.

God's grace and truth, His glory, are both intact and on universal display on the cross.

### **The Love of the Cross**

Another purpose of the cross was to be a visible demonstration of God's love. While God's Word has much to say about His love for fallen man, on the cross He did more than just *tell* us He loves us, He *showed* us.

Scripture leaves no doubt that there is nothing in fallen man that would motivate God to love us. All in all, we are a very unlovable lot.

But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. Isaiah 64:6,7

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. Romans 3:10-18

From the descriptions given above it is clear that there is nothing in us that would motivate God to love us, yet Scripture makes clear that He does. Scripture also makes clear that the cross is the place that God chose to show us His love by putting it into action.

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. I John 4:9,10

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8

In this day when self esteem and self worth are all the rage, even among "Christian" counselors, we must remember that God does not love us because we are special, we are special because God loves us. God does not love us because of who we are; He loves us because of who He is. The reason that the love of God is so amazing is that He loves those that are totally unlovable.

It is on the cross that God's boundless love is put on display for all to see and rejoice in.

## The Wisdom of the Cross

In addition to God's glory and love, the cross is also the place where God's wisdom is put on display.

In eternity past Satan conceived in his heart what he believed was a wise plan to take control of the universe away from God. He then set about to "merchandise" and "traffic" his plan to the angelic creation.

Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee. By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God: and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee. Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffic; therefore will I bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee. Ezekiel 28:15-18

Satan was able to "sell" his plan to one third of the angelic creation and to the entire human race in the person of Adam. What Satan had presented to creation as a wise plan was in reality the height of folly and those that followed the plan were fools. This is clearly demonstrated in Paul's description of the Gentile world as it turned away from God.

Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Romans 1:21-23

God's response to Satan's "wise plan" is very interesting and informative. God could have responded to Satan's rebellion with his great power by simply squashing him as easily and effortlessly as you and I swat a fly. He could have done the same with the human race when Adam and Eve joined in Satan's rebellion. He certainly had every right to do so and His infinite power would certainly have given Him the ability to do so. However, instead of responding with His great power, God responded with His great wisdom. God chose to defeat Satan with His wisdom rather than His power. God's truly wise plan involved defeating Satan with weakness, not strength.

The ultimate culmination of God's truly wise plan is seen in the cross. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he helps us understand that the *seeming* weakness of Christ's death is really the focal point of God's wise plan of reconciliation and redemption.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. I Corinthians 1:18-25

In the weakness of the cross, God's supreme wisdom is once-and-for-all put on display to the universe. This mighty demonstration of God's wisdom took Satan completely by surprise. It is only in hindsight (which as we know, is always 20/20) that Satan realized his fatal blunder.

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. I Corinthians 2:6-8

It is this matchless, manifold wisdom of God that we, as members of the Body of Christ, are making known to the angelic creation with our ministry here on earth in the Dispensation of Grace.

And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, Ephesians 3:9,10

It is on the cross that God's wisdom is put on display to the universe. God's wisdom is shown in His ability to triumph over Satan *in weakness*.

### God's View of the Cross

The cross is at the center of God's plan of reconciliation and redemption. All that God has done, is doing, or ever plans to do, is made possible by the cross. It is on the cross that God manifested His glory, His love, and His wisdom for the entire universe to see.

