

The Cross of Christ

by

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Introduction

J.C. Ryle was a prolific writer and especially gifted in writing short tracts of gospel subjects. Many of Ryle's tracts are rare today, especially his "Helmingham Series." J.C. Ryle's "Helmingham Series" is a collection of tracts and sermons that he wrote during his time as Rector of Helmingham, in Suffolk, England from 1844 to 1861. These tracts are characterized by their practical gospel focus and it was by these that he established his reputation as a popular and influential writer and preacher, before he became the Bishop of Liverpool.

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READER,

What do you think about the cross of Christ? The question may be one that you consider of little importance: but it deeply concerns the everlasting welfare of your soul.

Eighteen hundred years ago there was a man who said that he "gloried" in the cross of Christ. He was one who turned the world upside down by the doctrines he preached. He was one who did more to establish Christianity than any man

that ever lived. Yet what does he tell the Galatians? –“*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Galatians 6:14).

Reader, the “cross of Christ” must be an important subject, when an inspired apostle can speak of it in this way. Let me try to show you what the expression means. If you know what the cross of Christ means, then you may be able, by God’s help, to see the importance of it to your soul.

The instrument of crucifixion

The cross in the Bible sometimes means that wooden cross on which the Lord Jesus was nailed and put to death on Mount Calvary. This is what St. Paul had in his mind’s eye when he told the Philippians that Christ “*became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (Philippians 2:8). This is not the cross in which St. Paul gloried. He would have shrunk with horror from the idea of glorying in a mere piece of wood. I have no doubt he would have denounced the Roman Catholic adoration of the crucifix as profane, blasphemous, and idolatrous.

The affliction of the believer

The cross sometimes means the afflictions and trials which believers in Christ have to go through if they follow Christ faithfully, for their religion’s sake. This is the sense in which our Lord uses the word, when he says, “*He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me*” (Matthew 10:38). This also is not the sense in which Paul uses the word when he writes to the Galatians. He knew that cross well. He carried it patiently: but he is not speaking of it here.

The doctrine of the atonement

But the cross also means in some places the doctrine that Christ died for sinners upon the cross—the atonement that he made for sinners, by his suffering for them on the cross—the complete and perfect sacrifice for sin which he offered up, when he gave His own body to be crucified. In short, this one word, “the cross,” stands for Christ crucified, the only Saviour. This is the meaning in which Paul uses the expression, when he tells the Corinthians, “*The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness*” (1 Corinthians 1:18). This is the meaning in which he wrote to the Galatians, “*God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross.*” He simply meant, “*I glory in nothing but Christ crucified, as the salvation of my soul.*”

Jesus Christ crucified was the joy and delight, the comfort and the peace, the hope and the confidence, the foundation and the resting-place, the ark and the refuge, the food and the medicine of Paul's soul.

He did not think of what he had done himself and suffered himself. He did not meditate on his own goodness, and his own righteousness. He loved to think of what Christ had done, and Christ had suffered—of the death of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, the atonement of Christ, the blood of Christ, the finished work of Christ. In this he did glory. This was the sun of his soul.

This is the subject he loved to preach about. He was a man who went to and fro on the earth, proclaiming to sinners that the Son of God had shed His own heart's blood to save their souls. He walked up and down the world telling people that Jesus Christ had loved them and died for their sins upon the cross. Mark how he says to the Corinthians, *"I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins"* (1 Corinthians 15:3); *"I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2). He—a blaspheming, persecuting Pharisee—had been washed in Christ's blood: he could not hold his peace about it. He was never weary of telling the story of the cross.

This is the subject he loved to dwell upon when he wrote to believers. It is wonderful to observe how full his epistles generally are of the sufferings and death of Christ—how they run over with "thoughts that breathe and words that burn" about Christ's dying love and power. His heart seems full of the subject: he enlarges on it constantly; he returns to it continually. It is the golden thread that runs through all his doctrinal teaching, and practical exhortations. He seems to think that the most advanced Christian can never hear too much about the cross.

This is what he lived upon all his life, from the time of his conversion. He tells the Galatians, *"The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20). What made him so strong to labour? What made him so willing to work? What made him so unwearied in endeavouring to save some? What made him so persevering and patient? I will tell you the secret of it all. He was always feeding by faith on Christ's

body and Christ's blood. Jesus crucified was the meat and drink of his soul.

And, reader, you may rest assured that Paul was right. You can depend on the cross of Christ—the death of Christ on the cross to make atonement for sinners—is the centre truth in the whole Bible. This is the truth we begin with when we open Genesis. The seed of the woman bruising the serpent's head, is nothing else but a prophecy of Christ crucified. This is the truth that shines out, though veiled, all through the law of Moses and the history of the Jews. The daily sacrifice, the Passover lamb, the continual shedding of blood in the tabernacle and the temple—all these were emblems of Christ crucified. This is the truth that we see honoured in the vision of heaven, before we close the book of Revelations. *"In the midst of the throne and of the four beasts,"* we are told, *"and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb, as it had been slain"* (Revelation 5:6). Even in the midst of heavenly glory we catch a view of Christ crucified. Take away the cross of Christ, and the Bible is a dark book. It is like the Egyptian hieroglyphics, without the key that interprets their meaning, they are curious and wonderful, but of no real use.

Reader, mark what I say. You may know a good deal about the Bible. You may know the outlines of the histories it contains, and the dates of the events described, just as a man knows the history of his country. You may know the names of the men and women mentioned in it, just as a man knows Caesar, Alexander the Great, or Napoleon. You may know the several precepts of the Bible, and admire them, just as a man admires Plato, Aristotle, or Seneca. But if you have not yet found out that Christ crucified is the foundation of the whole volume, you have read your Bible up to now with very little profit. Your religion is a heaven without a sun, an arch without a keystone, a compass without a needle, a clock without spring or weights, a lamp without oil. It will not comfort you. It will not deliver your soul from hell.

Reader, mark what I say again. You may know a good deal about Christ, by a kind of head knowledge. You may know who he was, and where he was born, and what he did. You may know his miracles, his sayings, his prophecies, and his ordinances. You may know how he lived, and how he suffered, and how he died. But unless you know the power of Christ's cross by experience,—unless you know and feel within you, that the blood shed on that cross has washed

away your own particular sins—unless you are willing to confess that your salvation depends entirely on the work that Christ did on the cross—unless this is the case, Christ is no profit to you. The mere knowing Christ's name will never save you. You must know his cross and his blood, or else you will die in your sins.

Reader, as long as you live, beware of a religion that does not focus on the cross. You live in times when the warning is sadly needful. Beware, I say again, of a religion without the cross.

There are hundreds of places of worship in our day, in which there is almost everything except the cross. There is carved oak, and sculptured stone; there is stained glass, and brilliant painting; there are solemn services, and a constant round of ordinances: but the real cross of Christ is not there. Jesus crucified is not proclaimed in the pulpit. The Lamb of God is not lifted up, and salvation by faith in him is not freely proclaimed. And it is all wrong. Beware of places of worship like this; they are not apostolic, they would not have satisfied Paul.

There are thousands of religious books published in our times, in which there is everything except the cross. They are full of directions about sacraments, and praises of the Church; they abound in exhortations about holy living, and rules for the attainment of perfection; they have plenty of fonts and crosses, both inside and outside but the real cross of Christ is left out. The Saviour and his dying love, are either not mentioned, or mentioned in an unscriptural way. And hence they are worse than useless. Beware of such books; They are not apostolic, they would never have satisfied Paul.

Reader, Paul gloried in nothing but the cross. Strive to be like him. Set Jesus crucified fully before the eyes of your soul. Don't listen to any teaching which would put something between you and Christ. Do not fall into the old Galatian error. Do not think that anyone in our day is a better guide than the apostles. Do not be ashamed of the old paths in which men walked who were inspired by the Holy Ghost. Do not let the vague talk of men who speak great swelling words about catholicity, and the church, and the ministry, disturb your peace, and make you loose your hands from the cross. Churches, ministers, and sacraments are all useful in their way, but they are not Christ crucified. Do not give Christ's

honour to another - *"He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."*

Reader, I lay these thoughts before your mind. What you think now about the cross of Christ I cannot tell; but I can wish you nothing better than this—that you may be able to say with the apostle Paul, before you die or meet the Lord, *"God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

HYMN.

For ever here my rest shall be,
Close to Thy bleeding side:
This is my hope, and all my plea,—
For me the Saviour died.

My dying Saviour and my Cod,
Fountain for guilt and sin,
Sprinkle me ever with Thy blood,
And cleanse and keep me clean.

Wash me and make me thus Thine own,
Wash me, and mine Thou art;
Wash me, hut not my feet alone,—
My hands, my head, my heart.

Th' atonement of Thy blood apply,
Till faith to sight improve;
Till hope shall end in perfect joy,
And all my soul be love.