

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Easter Broadcasts: Easter - The Cross (2001)

Many years ago Reverend George Bennard wrote a hymn called "*The Old Rugged Cross*" The first line of that hymn is "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame." While the cross originally was a pagan sign, about the third century it became the emblem of Christianity. Far more important than it being an emblem is the meaning of the cross. Certainly we can see from Scripture that it is connected with suffering and shame.

On this Easter day, as we think about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, it is right that we take time to think about the meaning of His death for us today. We need to remember, too, that in His resurrection life, the Lord Jesus lives in the believer today.

Crucifixion has been described as the most degrading and painful punishment there is. The Romans only used it for the very worst crimes. They used a short beam fastened to an upright stake. Hands and feet nailed the poor victim to it. The torture was dreadful and the thirst great, but as no vital organs were reached, it was possible for the victim to last three days. Often a stupefying drink was offered to dull the pain but the Lord Jesus refused this. He accepted the cross as the will of God and would have nothing to lessen the load He was to bear. In Philippians 2, the "death of the cross" is used to describe how far His obedience took Him. "And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." He endured the cross with all its pain, shame, and degradation, but not only so, He suffered at the hand of God when He was made sin for us. He took willingly the judgement that should have been ours.

It was normal for a condemned man to carry his cross to the place of crucifixion. A notice was hung about his neck stating what he had been convicted of. If we had been standing by the roadside in those days, and saw a crowd being led by a man carrying a cross, we would know that he had been condemned to death. This actually took place with the Lord Jesus as the gospel of John records, "And He bearing His cross went forth." But the cross is also used in a figurative way. In Matthew 16:24, the Lord Jesus says, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it."

The Lord Jesus says that if we are to be truly His disciples then we must accept the judgement of the cross upon ourselves. This does not mean that we shall have to die for Him, although many have done so, but that we must accept all that the cross represents upon ourselves. For the Lord Jesus it was the judgement of God against sin on our behalf for us it is the judgement of self for Christ.

The apostle Paul often speaks of this in his writings. In the epistle to the Galatians that we are looking at he says, "I am crucified with Christ", Galatians 2:20. He speaks about suffering persecution for the cross of Christ in 6:12 and again in 6:14 "the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

In the epistle to the Galatians Paul uses very strong language to denounce what the Galatian Christians had allowed to come in to Christianity because it was destroying the very foundation of it. He speaks of the cross as being the only remedy to this. They were saying that as well as the death of Christ it was also necessary to keep the law in order to be saved. You may say to me that a Christian should keep the law and that is right, but we cannot be justified before God by it. Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ." To suggest that I need to do something in addition to believing the gospel is in fact saying that the death of Christ is not sufficient to save me. This is a very serious error. We may think that keeping the law is a very pious thing to do but to say that I need to keep the law, or to be circumcised, in order to be justified before God, is really saying that the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross left something undone, so I have to do it. On the cross the Lord Jesus said, "It is finished." The veil of the temple being rent at that moment would indicate that the system of law keeping as set up by Moses had been set aside. In Hebrews 9:8-9 we read, "The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while the first tabernacle was yet standing: which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect" and then in Hebrews 10:14, "For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." The word "forever" means that it goes on continuously. Nothing can alter it and it lasts forever.

Another well-known hymn says:

*“Not the labour of my hands  
Can fulfil the law’s demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears for ever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.”*

The real motive of those men who taught this was a desire to please men, or to make the Gospel more attractive by adding something to it, but in so doing, they were in fact destroying the Gospel. Paul was filled with wonder that they had so soon turned to a different gospel that was not a Gospel. Verses 6 and 7 read, “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not a gospel; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ”. Unfortunately there is much of this going on today. Some would like Christianity without a cross. They look upon the life of Christ as being an example that we have to follow to be pleasing to God. This is true after we have been saved. Then the Holy Spirit gives us the power to do it. But if I do not know that the cross of Christ was the judgement of God against me, and that I need repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is impossible for me to walk as the Lord Jesus did. Also much that pleases us naturally is being brought in to Christianity so that it becomes an entertainment instead of it being the service of God. These things are thought up by men and not led by the Holy Spirit; this is not real Christianity at all.

Paul says that such a Gospel is according to man and not according to God, because it honours and flatters man, making something of him. By contrast the true gospel humbles us by directing our faith to the cross of Christ. Where we see what we really are in God’s estimation being put away by His death.

One thing leads to another. If we give up the real Gospel, there is no telling where it will lead. In 3:1 we read, “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you.” The word ‘bewitched’ has the idea of being charmed or fascinated in it. This proves that the other Gospel that they had heard only appealed to them as men. Paul directs their attention to the cross. It seems as though some of them may have actually seen the crucifixion. If that is so, how quickly they had forgotten that dreadful scene. So Paul has to remind them of it.

In 5:1 we read, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” The Galatians were being held in bondage because keeping the law was being forced on them, whereas the Gospel of Christ brings us into perfect liberty. Not to do what we like, but rather to serve God in the way that pleases Him. In being circumcised, they had set aside the work of the Lord Jesus. Paul says, “Christ is become of no effect to you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” They had begun so well. Paul could go on to say “Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?” They had stopped making progress spiritually. They were no longer growing up into Christ; they had gone back to keeping the law for righteousness and were not being led by the Holy Spirit.

How many Christians we once knew who were going on well with the Lord Jesus but now something has come into their lives that has hindered their progress. Satan will use anything to do this. Here he was using false teachers, men who introduced things that appealed to the flesh in ourselves. It may not always be false doctrine. We live in a material world where the need ‘to get’ becomes the driving force in our lives, and so the world takes the place that the Lord Jesus should have. Very soon it becomes difficult to tell the difference between unbelievers and ourselves. The teaching of the cross will stop this. If we understand what God has done to all that we are naturally in the death of His Son, we shall realise that only the Spirit of God can produce in us what is pleasing to Him. We must remember that the way we live will affect others. We read in 5:9, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” If I am not going on right myself, I will cause others to stumble.

All this takes away the real meaning of the cross. 5:11 says, “If I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offence of the cross ceased.” If I really live as a Christian then I will be different from the world and may suffer persecution. The world does not like the idea that God thinks I am useless and ruined. We are told that there is a bit of good in all of us, but God does not think so. If His Son had to die when He was made sin for me, then there can be nothing good in me. God had to forsake the Lord Jesus when He took my place because He was being made what I am. So the cross becomes offensive to the world. They say it is scandalous to think this. This is exactly what the word offence means.

In Romans 6, the Apostle explains how the death of Christ has not only dealt with what I am in the sight of God, but also how practically it should affect me. He explains that when I am baptised then I am baptised unto the death of Christ. I am saying that when the Lord Jesus took my place on the cross bearing my judgement, died, was buried and went out of sight as far as men are concerned, so in being baptised I publicly say that all that I am as sinful, I have

finished with. In verse 4 we read, "Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Then in verse 6 he tells us what God has done: "Knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be annulled, that henceforth we should not serve sin." The practical effect of this comes out in verse 11: "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

In Galatians 2, Paul very readily accepts this about himself. In verse 20 he says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and 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." If the crucifixion of Christ is the crucifixion of all that we are as fallen children of Adam, then we have become dead to the law. Paul's heart was filled with the love of the Son of God who had died for him. Paul not only understood his identification with Christ in His death, but he heartily accepted it, in all that it implied, and he found his satisfaction in the Son of God in glory. Consequently the sentence of death lay on all that he was by nature, and Christ lived in him and characterised his life. This raises the question: "Where do I stand in relation to the death of Christ?" If we are truly believers, then our old man has been crucified with Christ, but have we taken it up in our experience as Paul did?

At the end of this epistle Paul seems to go even further. He was so concerned about the Galatians that it seems he actually wrote this letter himself instead of dictating it.

He wanted them to realise his concern and love for them. In verse 11 he says, "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand." Then he again speaks of suffering persecution for the cross. These false teachers were avoiding persecution by what they were teaching. If I say what is popular, I will not be persecuted for it. But if I preach the cross, then I will suffer. He says in verse 12 "As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ."

He closes with some very profound words. Verse 14 says, "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." He applies the cross to the world. Crucifixion was not only death, but also a death of shame. It was as though he said, "In the death of Christ the world-system has been executed in my eyes, and I have been executed in the world's eyes. I discard the world as a thing of shame, and it discards me as a thing of shame." He was not unhappy about this, but he gloried in it.

We may well ask how was this? He knew the value of the cross and had before him new creation of which the cross is the basis. He was now "in Christ Jesus." Where there is new creation, circumcision and uncircumcision are of no account. Verse 15 says "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature". To those who were walking as he was, he prays that they may have peace and mercy.

He finishes this letter rather suddenly. He is not free in his spirit about these Galatians. Paul had many critics surrounding him; some even challenged his apostleship, but he brushes them all aside. The Romans had a custom of branding their slaves and by doing so settled any question as to who their master was. Paul was just like that. The meaning of the word 'marks' in verse 17 means, 'a brand or a stigma'. The floggings and stonings he had endured in his service for Christ had left their marks on him. But they showed who his master was. Those who opposed him knew nothing of this; their teaching avoided persecution for themselves, but increased Paul's.

The last verse further brings out his character. He had the sentence of death in himself and was not diverted from his cause by the attitude of others. His last words are directed to those who were truly the Lord's, "Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."

On this Easter day, let us each one face the challenge of the cross of Jesus, so that our lives may reflect the power of His resurrection.

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