

## **The Centrality of the Cross**

**Galatians 6:7-18**

By [Dr. James M. Baird](#)

Let us continue our worship of that God who is the true God and the God that we give our worship and love to, as we turn in His Bible to the book of Galatians, chapter 6 of the book of Galatians. I remember the time a young man invited me out for lunch. At the conclusion of the lunch (he was a young businessman, married, had some new children in his family) and he turned to me and he asked, he said, "What is the very center of Christianity? I grew up in the church; somehow I missed it. I have fallen away. I know something of the Bible, yet somehow it never clicked." He said, "In my business, I'm very direct," he said. "Give me the bottom line. What is Christianity all about? Where is the secret?" How would you have answered?

Suppose, suppose a stranger visited Jackson, Mississippi and entered into the worship service and he knew absolutely nothing about Christianity. He's come from another place, perhaps from another religion, and he knows absolutely nothing. What would he learn from this worship service as the secret, the center, the core, the essential of Christianity? Can you see that man walk up the sidewalk, look at the architecture of this church—his eye would be drawn to that majestic steeple and then on the top would be a symbol. He would walk in the door and he would be met by ushers. They would have a beautiful badge over their hearts, a red badge, and there would be a yellow symbol. He would walk into the sanctuary, and I would trust that he would notice that the architecture of the sanctuary is laid out in that same symbol. He would hear the confession of the faith of the church for 1600 years, and at the center of it would be the suffering of Jesus Christ, and then he would hear us sing about clinging to the cross. And he would assume that somehow at the center of Christianity is the cross of Jesus Christ. Would he not be right?

Yet, always the church has asked that question, What is the secret? What is the center? In the day of the Apostle Paul, in the Galatian churches, a group of churches in what is called Turkey today, the question would be raised then, "What is the center, the core, the bottom line of Christianity?" There were those itinerant preachers that were coming through in that day as they do in our day, and there were some in and around the churches of Galatia, and they were teaching that if you want to have the approval of God, it is alright to have all these things of Christianity, but the secret is found in a church ritual, and you

must do this to be a Christian. And the Apostle Paul disagrees, and answers that suggestion that the centrality is taken away from the very heart of Christianity and it is put on something else. And can it be that there is somebody here today or listening to my voice who has missed the very heart and has wondered why things have not clicked? May God use this Scripture reading and this message, and all of this month may it be a specific and a great month in the life of this church. Now hear the word of God. The Apostle Paul points his finger at the very place of the secret of Christianity. The book of Galatians, the last chapter, chapter 6, and I begin to read in verse 7:

**Galatians 6:7-18:**

7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. 8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. 9 And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. 10 As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. 11 Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. [This was when Paul did not dictate and he was writing in large letters] 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. 13 For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. 14 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. 15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. 16 And as many as walk according to this rule, peace *be* on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. 18 Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

Let me read to you our key verse, verse 14, "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." God give us insight.

You know, every religion that is a monotheistic religion has a symbol. For instance, the symbol of Judaism is the Star of David. The symbol of Islam is the crescent. Even in our day, in the secular world, in this century, the hammer and the sickle have represented a certain kind of a nationalism. Nazis chose the swastika. The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ has had its symbol all these years and centuries, the cross. Who chose it? Who chose the cross? May I suggest to you that it was God, no man and no group but God? And may I suggest to you that the symbol is found in this book, in His own words. For from the very beginning, from the book of the Revelation all the way back to the book of

Genesis, beginning to end, there is a thread that draws it all together and that thread is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## I. The Old Testament and the cross

Let us examine, first of all, the Old Testament. In the Old Testament in the fourth chapter, the first order of worship that is given is by Abel and it is the worship of a lamb, worship involving an animal sacrifice. When you come to Abraham in the 15th chapter, a covenant is made with Abraham in behalf of all the people of the world. God is going to do something and that covenant is brought together, and it's clenched by a sacrifice of an animal as a symbol. When Moses comes four hundred years later on Mt. Sinai and the Ten Commandments and the moral law is given, there is also the law of worship. How do I worship my God? And it is through the sacrifice of a lamb in behalf of the people for the forgiveness of sins.

Six hundred years later, the Church of God in the Old Testament has fallen to the place where it is dead. They are much in public worship, but on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday there is no correlation. They are simply in church but it is not lived out in their lives, and the prophets are raised up to call the people back to God and to holiness and righteousness. And where were they pointed to? They are pointed to the sacrifice of God in the coming of the Messiah. I grew up with a boy. His family said they believed the Old Testament. Neither one of us read the Bible. Years later after I had been called to the ministry, I met with him again. He was the closest thing I ever had in school days to a brother. And I said, "I want to read you a passage; you tell me if it comes out of the Old or the New Testament."

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put *him* to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see *his* seed, he shall prolong *his* days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, *and* shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him *a portion* with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

And my friend said, "Somewhere in the New Testament." I said, "No. Some 700 years before Christ came on this earth, the prophet Isaiah in the 53 chapter gave us those promises about the cross."

## II. The New Testament and the cross

Then we come into the New Testament, Paul is the representative of all those people who point to the cross. As God has prepared His people in the Old Testament, when Christ is presented publicly by John the Baptist, it is with these words, "Behold, the Lamb of God. The sacrifice of God that taketh away the sin of the world." When you come to the writing of the gospels, the historical account of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Holy Spirit chooses the cross.

There is a disproportionate amount of space given to the time of Christ's life that begins with His entering into Jerusalem, the week that He shall be crucified, and then His resurrection. He is presented to us as a man, some 33 years of age. Most of the gospels deal with His public ministry those three years, yet here is a space that is given to that week of suffering by Matthew. Two-fifths of all of the gospel of Matthew is concerned with Palm Sunday. The gospel of Mark, three-fifths deal with the cross. Luke devotes one-third of all the words to the cross and the surrounding events. And the gospel of John: one half, one half!

When I come to the New Testament and I look at the single man that presents to me the cross most effectively my heart and mind goes to Peter, because it was Peter who resisted the idea of Jesus Christ going to the cross. Peter fought Him in the 16th chapter of Matthew when Peter confesses, 'Thou are the Christ. You're the Messiah.' Immediately Christ says, 'Now we go to Jerusalem and there I shall be crucified.' Peter turns immediately, and the Bible says he rebukes Jesus Christ. He says, 'Far be it from Thee.'

Why? It is inconceivable to us, the repugnancy of someone who would be crucified. To us it is a symbol, a symbol of hope and joy and power. But the cross was the cruelest method of torture that man has ever invented. The Romans refused to let a Roman citizen be crucified. He may be put to death but never by the cross; that was left for aliens. Jesus Christ suffered the most horrible kind of a death. Men usually lived on the cross two or three days. When Christ said, 'I go to Jerusalem to be crucified.' Peter said, 'It cannot be.' When they were in the Garden of Gethsemane and they came to take the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that He was on His way to the cross, Peter pulled out a sword and was prepared to fight and that's when Christ said, "Put up that sword. All I have to do is call to the heavenly Father and there are legions of angels. Put up that sword." The Lord Jesus Christ made His way to the cross. Peter resisted the very idea of the cross and yet after the resurrection it is Peter who stands up. And on the first sermon preached after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when the explanation is given about the meaning of the gift of the Holy Spirit, he then launches into a sermon with these words:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God

among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be held by it.

That's how it begins: he begins with the cross. The most beautiful words to me of all of the implications of the cross are found in the second chapter of Peter's first epistle where he speaks about that "great Shepherd of our souls," "the bishop of our souls who goes to the tree and hangs on the cross so that He might bring our souls to Himself." When you come to the book of the Revelation, Jesus Christ is represented as One who is in heaven, the Lamb that is Slain and then the King: He is both the suffering servant and the King of all creation who is coming for His people. When that young man asked me, "What is the center of Christianity?" may I suggest to you that God said to him (not me), 'The cross. It is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.' The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said in John chapter 12, "If I be raised up from this Earth," and the next verse He says (it's talking about His death), "If I be raised up, I will draw all men unto Myself." It's the cross.

### **III. The cross of Christ in history**

It's true: wherever the cross of Jesus Christ, and the Christ of the cross, have been raised up to people, people have been drawn to Him for life and salvation. When the Church began, they suffered. And then came a man who would become the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, his name was Constantine, and in the year 313, the night before a battle he sees in a vision the cross and the words "Conquer in this sign." And thereafter the Church conquers not by military ways, but by the sufferings of Jesus Christ. But within a few short hundreds of years the Church turns to dead formalism, and they're just going through the motions, just as it was in the day of Isaiah.

And then God begins to raise up people who are going to present the cross of Jesus Christ, but not as some ritual. In the 1300's, John Wycliffe translated the Bible, and he sent out laymen. A man in the 1400's gets his writings in Bohemia, in the city of Prague. His name is John Huss, and John Huss presents, 'It's the cross of Christ. Look to Him,' and Huss is burned at the stake. In the 1500's Luther is seeking to find God, and he is on his knees praying and working his way up church steps when it is as though the voice of God said, 'It is by faith in Jesus Christ, He who died for you on the cross.' And in the 1600's men came to this country from England. They called them, we called them "the Pilgrims," and they came with the kingdom of God, and they raised up Christ and His cross as the secret of life. And this country entered into a way of life that has never gone away.

In the 1700's in Dusseldorf, Germany, there was a young painter; his name was

Sternberg. He noticed in his city a group of gypsies entertaining. They had a ten-year-old girl and she was delightful, and she was dancing and he asked for permission to paint. And he brought the little girl into his studio and painted her dancing. It's still called "Gypsy Girl Dancing." But the little girl began to notice the unfinished paintings and she saw one of Christ on the cross unfinished, and asked Sternberg, "Who is that?" "Jesus." "Was He a bad man?" "No, He was the best of all men. He died for all mankind." And the little girl asked Sternberg, "Did he die for you?" And he could never get those words out of his memory, one, two years. And in a little service a friend took him to a worship service like this of a group of men who were called "the Reformers," and he heard about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the death on the cross, and the implications of that death. He went back and now, as a believer, he finished that painting, and he hung it in Dusseldorf's great museum. And shortly after it was held there came a noble count; his name was Nicholas. Nicholas was raised in a Christian family and is walking through the museum and he sees this picture of Christ on the cross with Sternberg's words underneath, "This I did for thee. What hast thou done for Me?" And Nicholas Zinzendorf is struck and gives his life to Christ on the spot. Within two years; he finds a group of people. You know where they came from? They came from John Huss, almost three centuries previous. They who had been cast out of Prague made their way to Poland, but once again suffered and were cast out. And Zinzendorf says, "Come," and "Come and live in my lands." And they do and they set up a place. They called it "The Haven." And within two years, in the year 1732, they send out their first missionaries to the black people in the western world in the island we call St. Thomas in the Caribbean. And these Moravian brothers continue to go out in world missions with the idea of the cross of Jesus Christ.

In the year 1736, four years later, they are on their way to the Americas and there is a man on that ship also who is coming. There is a storm; the man is frightened to death though he is a preacher. He is frightened because he believes he is going to die. These Moravians are singing hymns of praise to the crucified Christ and he asks them after the storm abated, "How could you do that?" And they share with him the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. John Wesley spends two years in Georgia then returns to England. And on a Wednesday night in the year 1736, in a Wednesday night service the preacher is simply reading the preface to Luther's commentary on the book of Romans, and a light dawns on Wesley. It is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of God. And he says his heart was strangely warmed. And Wesley goes out and he is invited by Whitefield, and they are preaching not in the church, but they are preaching on the street corners because the church won't let them. Whitefield makes his way to the United States and Whitefield greatly influences the most brilliant mind that the United States has ever produced. His name is Jonathan Edwards and there is revival that comes all across the United States. And within a short 20 years the United States is made a nation, a free nation, in the midst of this tremendous religious thrust. And after a nation, the west opens up, and they pour across the Alleghenies into Kentucky and Alabama and they come to Mississippi by the

thousands, preaching the cross, the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. The shadow of the cross falls on this congregation. Jesus said, "Whenever I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto Myself."

In the year 1825, the governor of Hong Kong is approaching the nearby Island of Macao. On that island he finds on a hill, high crested hill, the remains of a great church that the Portuguese had erected three hundred years previous. The typhoons and storms had struck the church and the church was in ruin. All had fallen except the front wall, and above that front wall, on the top of this church, was a huge bronze cross. The governor's name was John Bowring. He goes back to Hong Kong and he writes:

In the cross of Christ I glory, towering oer the wrecks of time,  
All the light of sacred stories, gathers round its head sublime.  
When the woes of life oer take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy,  
Never shall the cross forsake me, lo it glows with peace and joy.  
When the sun of bliss is beaming, life and love upon my way when  
everything is going right,  
From the cross the radiance streaming, adds more luster to the day.  
Vain and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross a sanctified,  
Peace is there that knows no measure, joy that through all times abides.

Two years ago Jane and I were in a little village in England, at the little parish church at Elstow, looking at the stained glass window of that church where Bunyan had been raised up, and in that stain glass there is a picture of Christian from *Pilgrims Progress* kneeling at the foot of the cross and the burden is rolling off his back. The burden of his life and the burden of his sin rolls away. I was with a missionary a number of years ago, a whole series of preachers at a table at lunch and somebody had asked this missionary a question and he spoke with a loud voice, "The foot of the cross is the only answer. The church must come back to the foot of the cross." I remember that. Have you been to the foot of the cross or have you missed it? The apostle Paul said, "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ." All of the burdens of life will roll off there, if you will come, if you will come. 'The cross of the Lord Jesus Christ,' God says to that young man who says, "What's the heart? What's the core? What's the center of Christianity?" It is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for you. You come as we pray together.

*Beloved Heavenly Father, we thank Thee that down through the years, though the church has wandered and struggled, yet above is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray, Father, that it might not be a symbol of nothingness in our life but it might be the symbol of the fact that we have come to the Christ, the Messiah, and that we trust Him and embrace Him. We pray Thee that in this service and in this month that the full implication of our great Savior and what He has done would be pressed upon us. And we pray here today, for each and every soul, may it be dear God that we would all cling to the cross of the Christ*

*who loved us and gave Himself for us, that we might not perish but that we might have life, yea life everlasting. Hear our prayers. And may Thy benediction come from Heaven itself, and may Thy benediction rest upon the people of the cross. For it is now unto the Lord Jesus Christ who is able to keep you from folly; it is now under the Lord Jesus Christ He who is able at your death to present you sinless before His throne of grace in Heaven with exceeding great joy. To the only wise God who is our Savior, unto Him in our hearts, let there be glory, majesty; may He have dominion and power both now and forevermore. Amen.*

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