

Christ Knew a Cross was in the Plan for Him

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When “the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son” (Gal. 4:4). It was the fullness of time, providentially, prophetically, and practically. There was unification of the world through Roman rule. Much of the world had been welded into a community. Roman peace [*Pax Romana*] dominated the known civilized world. Language was another factor that unified the vast Roman Empire. The Greek language had become familiar to most. It was the fullness of time economically. It was the fullness of time morally. With the apostasy of Israel, the entire world sunk into moral hopelessness. It was at this time, at the darkest hour, that the voice of hope and light rang out from Galilee. In Christ is an introduction to the history of [redemptive grace]. And in Him, all history has its end as declared in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea. He grew up quietly and unnoticed in a retired Galilean mountain village of proverbial insignificance, and labored in a lowly carpenter-shop, culturally and geographically distant from the city of Jerusalem. There were limited means of instruction open to the humblest Jews. But He had the care of godly parents, the beauties of nature, the services of the synagogue, the secret communion of the soul with the Living God, and the Scriptures of the Old Testament as part of his upbringing.¹ Recorded by the prophets in the Old Testament, are His character (see article on *Christ in Prophecy*, for details) and His mission of grace-through the Cross.

A Jewish boy became a man when he was twelve years of age. So at age twelve Jesus, for the first time, went to the Passover celebration. When His parents left Jerusalem, Jesus was inadvertently left behind. They returned in haste to Jerusalem in search of Him. “For the Passover season it was the custom of the Sanhedrin to meet in the Public Temple Court to discuss, in the presence of all who would listen, religious and theological questions.”² His parents found Him in the temple, “. . .sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46). “Your father and I,” said Mary, “have been looking for you anxiously.” “Did you not know,” said

¹Philip Schaff, vol. 1. p. 101-102.

²William Barclay, ed., *Commentary On The Gospel Of Luke*. (The Westminster Press, 1975), 3:29.

Jesus, “that I must be in My Father’s house?” (Luke 2:48-49). Christ very gently but very definitely took the name *father* from Joseph and gave it to God. At age twelve, Jesus was speaking of God as “My Father,” and He expressed a sense of relationship to God. He also felt an inner compulsion to occupy Himself with His Father’s affairs, the work of redeeming grace by way of the Cross. He knew he had a duty, a destiny, an obligation, a purpose, and a mission, what there were emerged in His life and work in the narratives of the Gospels.

Whenever Jesus spoke of God as His Father, He used the definite article *The*, but He never used the definite article before “Father,” when He was speaking of God as the Father of anybody. In John 21:17 Jesus said, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.” But in the Greek New Testament, the form is different: “I ascend unto the Father of Me, and the Father of you.” This means hardly anything to an English reader, but it means everything to an interpreter of the Bible, and to one familiar with the idiom of the Greek Language.

In the gospel narratives, Jesus began to teach His disciples clearly about His suffering and His work of forgiving grace. It was the watershed point of His ministry. “Veiled hints; allusions, brief but pregnant, had been scattered throughout His earlier ministry.” “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” “The sign of the prophet Jonah.”³ Jesus took His disciples to the northern district around Caesarea Philippi, located about twenty miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee; there He put to them the direct question about who they thought He was.

Jesus was determined to get a verdict from his disciples. He asked, “And you who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:13). It is interesting to note that each of the three synoptic gospels has its own version of the saying of Peter. Matthew has, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Mark is briefest of all; “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). And Luke is clearest of all, “You are the Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. “From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priest and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on

³Alexander MacLaren, ed., 3 vols., *Great Sermons On The Birth, Death, And Resurrection Of Christ, (Christ Foreseeing The Cross)*, 2:12.

the third day.” As a consequence of Jesus’ death on the cross, the work of redemptive grace would be accomplished. Matthew wrote, “Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s” (Matt.16: 20-23).

To Christ, the scandal of the cross had relevance to everything in His life. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote: “This is the language of a man who simply is calculating that the course which He is pursuing is likely to end in His martyrdom; but the thing lies there before Him, a definite, fixed certainty; every detail known, the scene, the instruments, the non-participation of these in the final act of His death. . . the centrality of the cross was plain to Christ.”⁴

The Messianic work of Christ required the cross, and He could not by-pass the work of its scorn and shame. His redemptive work of grace on the cross was a divine thing. Christ was born into the world for a double purpose: *to serve and to die*. He recognized the necessity of His suffering. Mark stated, “He must suffer and be rejected and die, and everything written of Him in Scripture must be fulfilled” (Mark 8:31; 10:32-34). And according to Luke’s account, Jesus was determined to fulfill what had been written of Him: “He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51).

Jesus knew that the only way out of this world was through the scandal of the cross. He both recognized and accepted the scorn and shame of the cross. To Him, the “must [*go to the cross*] was no unwelcome obligation laid upon Him against His will, but one to which His whole nature responded and which He accepted.”⁵ He never recoiled in His will. His will accepted both the scandal and scorn of the cross with a [loving meaning and purpose] to save the world. He had no illusions about the cross; the cross was a certain reality for Him. There was a recognition of the unalterable purpose of God; a fixed purpose of an all-determining and all-ruling providence that He could not escape. Christ gave three interwoven reasons for His violent, premature, and purposeful death on the cross.

⁴Martin Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross*, ed., 1960, p. x.

⁵MacLeran, 2:17.

First, He knew He would die because He confronted the Jewish leadership. In His public ministry and His demonstration of graciousness, He was very clear and forceful, and devastating to the religious establishment. “While it was happening they were powerless to stop Him and, apparently, were even speechless.”⁶ The Jewish leadership saw Jesus as an untrained, self-appointed Rabbi; they refused to recognize Him and, therefore, rejected Him.

Although they did not recognize the source and legitimacy of Jesus’ power, they never questioned that He had it. His power and authority were unprecedentedly powerful and incontestable. The religious leaders knew such as Jesus displayed had to be of supernatural origin, and they knew He claimed it was from God (John 3:1-3). But they wanted Him out of the way.

The Jewish leadership wanted Him out of the way because Jesus said: “. . .the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it” (Matt. 21:43-44). He then pronounced judgment on them (Matt. 23:1-39).

When John the Baptist began to preach about the kingdom, he told the Pharisees and Sadducees who wanted to be baptized, first to “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). Jesus demanded no less from the Jewish leadership. The fruit of the kingdom is the demonstration of righteousness produced from a life delivered from sin, shame, and guilt. The unbelieving religious leaders would not turn from their sin and repent, therefore, they could not produce the fruit of the kingdom – genuine righteous behavior. They were spiritually barren, and, because of that willful barrenness, they were cursed, like the fig tree that had leaves but no figs (Matt. 21:18-19). They possessed an unrepentant attitude; therefore, they could not accept Christ.⁷

The Multitudes often acknowledged in amazement that Jesus taught authoritatively, with a clarity, definitiveness and certainty that was completely lacking in the pronouncements and interpretations of the Scribes (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22). His teachings were loaded with God’s love, God’s mercy, and God’s grace. Jesus pointedly ignored the Jewish establishment. He did not ask their approval for His teachings, His healings or His victories over demons. Jesus had God’s authority, and He sought no human authority, accreditation, ordination, or credentials.

⁶MacAthur, *New Testament Commentary On Matthew*, p. 286.

⁷MacAthur, p. 299.

By so doing, Jesus pitted Himself directly against the Jewish religious system and incurred its unrelenting wrath. The Jewish leadership was appalled that He had failed to consult the Sanhedrin and the Temple authorities. Moreover, He openly condemned them.

Mark related an example of Jesus' compassion as He healed a man with a shriveled hand in a Synagogue on the Sabbath day: "And the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (Mark 3:6). Luke stated, "All the people in the Synagogue were furious. They got up, and drove Him out of town, and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. Jesus walked right through the crowd and went His way" (Luke 4:16-30).

Second, He knew He would "die prematurely" because He came to fulfill the things written of the Messiah in the Old Testament Scripture: "The Son of Man is to go as it is written of Him" (Matt. 26:24). Christ, when alluding to the Old Testament prophetic witness, always linked His expiatory redemptive act of grace, suffering, death, and resurrection to the Messiah. After His resurrection, as He returned to Emmaus, He said to two of His disciples, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?" (Luke 24:25-27 and 46).

Jesus, by claiming to be the Messiah of Israel, established the credibility of the Old Testament message and messengers. The prophecies He fulfilled were historical. Consider the following passages: (Zach. 13:7; Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:37; Psalm 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17 cf., Acts 4:11; I Pet 2:7). These prophecies are clear and rather old. In fact several hundred years intervened between the prophecies and their fulfillment. Christ stood before the nation of Israel as (the living-Incarnate revelation of the living God), and as the One who revealed the developing purpose of God's saving grace.

As Christ hung suspended on the Cross, He made seven statements, and these were direct quotes from the Old Testament: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1); "I thirst" (Psalm 69:21); and "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5). These three Psalms all described the deep anguish of an innocent victim who suffered physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually at the hands of His enemies, but who steadfastly trusted in God. He suffered spiritually, in His death on the

cross because the effect of sin separated Him from God the Father (Mark 15:33-38; Matt. 27:45 *ff.*; Luke 23:44; John 19:30).

The relationship between the Father and the Son cannot be broken, especially when we are thinking about the atonement. God the Father was taking action through the Son, “who reconciled us to Himself through Christ,” and “in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Yet, in another place Paul said: “. . .the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Christ. . ., reconciling all things to Himself, making peace by the blood of the cross” (Col. 2:9; Eph. 2:16). The living God, resurrects us in Christ, forgiving all our sins, canceling all our guilt, shame, and sins through His free grace, through Christ on the cross. John Stott, commented on the death of Christ: “. . . God through Christ substituted Himself for us. Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice. The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy. . . For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices Himself for man and put Himself where man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”⁸

In early prophetic history, Isaiah the prophet wrote by divine inspiration about 740 B. C., and spoke of the suffering and glory of Christ. The Messiah of God is presented by Isaiah as One who was “despised and rejected,” and he went on to state that Jesus’ blood would be sprinkled for many nations, for His subsequent glory, and for His exalted state in all of chapters 52 and 53 (of Isaiah).

Moreover, in the New Testament, Paul, Peter, Matthew, Luke and John, altogether allude to at least eight verses from Isaiah chapter 53. This was the origin of their confident detailed application; no doubt they must have heard it from Jesus’ own lips. It was this chapter, more than any other that prophesied about the vocation of the Messiah to come. He was to suffer, to die for human sin, shame, and guilt, to justify many through grace, and so be glorified.

⁸John R. W. Stott, *The Cross Of Christ*, pp. 156-162.

“The entire Old Testament was a detailed attempt of the actual statements of the New Testament doctrines of a suffering, a gracious, as well as a triumphant, Messiah –a Messiah passing through suffering and death to glory and life.”⁹ No wonder the Hebrew writer said of Him, “. . . Who for the joy set before Him endured the scandal of the cross, despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

Third, He died by choice. Jesus said, “I lay down my life [as a ransom for many]” (John 10:14). He was determined to fulfill what was written of the Messiah, however painful it would be. He was resolved to do the Father’s will and accomplish His work. He made this work His food (John 4:34). The death of Christ was a voluntary death. He felt under constraint, (RSV ‘constrained.’ literally means “hemmed in”) even under compulsion and said: “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is complete” (Luke 12:50).

This was the perspective of Jesus concerning His death. Despite the great importance of His teachings, His example, and His works of compassion and power, none of these was central to His mission. It is quite clear that one of the things that dominated His mind was not the *living* of His life but the *giving* of His life. This final self-sacrifice was the “hour” for which He had come into the world. All four Gospel writers show that they understand this as pivotal of His work, His inescapable suffering, His death and His resurrection, which they put in these narratives of His last few days on earth. These occupied between a third and a quarter of the three Synoptic Gospels, while John’s Gospel has been justly described as having two parts, “the Books of the Signs” and “the Book of the Passover.” Christ’s shameful death on the scorn of the cross became the mark of graceful redemptive action for men and women in the flow of human history.

⁹George Milligan, *The Suffering Of Christ*, ed., 3 vols., Baker Book House, 1963, p. 50.

The Person and work of Christ belong together. God in Christ endured our judgment because of our sin, shame, and guilt – since hell was [is] the alternative. This is the true “scandal, the stumbling-block of the cross.” Our proud human hearts rebel against it. Our pride cannot endure someone paying the price for our sins. It is a complete embarrassment to us and we attempt self-justification through human works in our approach to God in order to cover our shame, guilt, sin, and wicked-rebellion; but our human “. . . works are as filthy rags . . .” (Isa. 64:6), before the personal-infinite, living God. Human sin, shame and guilt found its antidote in Christ on the Cross. Amen!

Augustus Toplady, in his immortal hymn *Rock Of Ages*’ wrote:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to your Cross I cling;
Naked, come to you for dress;
Helpless, look to you for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.¹⁰

¹⁰Alton Howard, *Songs Of the Church*, (Howard Publishing Company, 1971), Hymn No., 445.