

GOD'S GRACE IS SEEN THROUGH THE SCORN OF THE CROSS
Part I of IV

INTRODUCTION

From Jesus' youth, indeed even from His birth, the cross cast its shadow ahead of Him. His obedience to God, His death on the cross, His resurrection, and His mission of grace were central to His purpose. The early church recognized this and made it their paramount message, both to the Jewish world and the pagan world. Yet, questions have arisen. Do Christians today, for the sake of the cross, "count the world but loss" and "boast in it alone," and "sacrifice" everything for that message? Can the Christian faith be accurately summed up as "the faith of Christ crucified?" What are the grounds for this concentration on the cross of Christ?

The Acceptance of Signs and Symbols of the Cross

Every religion or philosophy has its visual symbolism. The ancient Chinese, Egyptians, and Indians now associated with Buddhism used a lotus flower to symbolize the emergence of beauty and harmony out of the muddy waters of chaos. They also used a wheel shape to depict the cycle of birth and death. These religions teach human works merged with pagan beliefs and atoning grace is not mentioned in their doctrines.

Ancient Judaism avoided visual signs or symbols for fear of disobeying the second of the Ten Commandments which forbade the making of any images to worship. But modern Jews have adopted the "Shield or Star of David", a hexagram formed by combining two triangles. It speaks of God's covenant with King David that his throne would be established forever and that the Messiah would come through his lineage. God's amazing grace was introduced to the world through Judaism.

Islam, which arose in the Middle East, is symbolized by the crescent moon. The sign depicts a phase of the moon. "This sign was taken from the ancient Chaldeans who had a multitude of gods, the foremost being "Nanna", the moon god."¹ Atoning grace is absent from the religion of Islam.

The Marxist "hammer and sickle" adopted in 1917 by the Communist Soviet government, represented industry and agriculture. On their flag, the two symbols are crossed to signify the union of workers and peasants and of factory and field. The Aryan² race adopted the swastika in early 1900. They maintained the cross as the symbol of redeeming grace, but bent the arm clockwise to symbolize perhaps the movement of the sun across the sky, the cycle of the four seasons, or the process of creativity and prosperity. "Hitler took the sign from the Aryan race and made it the sinister sign of Nazi racial bigotry."³

¹ Ibid, ch., 2, p. 30.

² Aryan, a tribal name formerly for Indo-European of the Aryans, A person belonging to, or supposed to be a descendant of, the prehistoric people who spoke this Language. Aryan, has no validity as a racial term, although it has been so used, notoriously by the German Nazis to mean "a Caucasian of non-Jewish descent." The use of the word in connection with race is due to the idea, regarded by most ethnologists as false, that peoples who spoke the same or related languages must have had a common racial origin. Misuse of Aryan has led to its replacement in linguistic discussion by Indo European. Aryanize in Nazi usage, to rid of (so-called) non-Aryan elements. Webster's New World Dictionary, (Nashville: Tennessee, The Southwestern Publishing Co., 1969), S.v. "Aryan," p. 42.

³ John R. W. Stott, The Cross Of Christ. (Illinois: Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity Press), 1986, p. 20.

Christianity, then, is not an exception in having a visual symbol. The cross, now accepted as the universal symbol of Christianity, was at first avoided, originally because of its shameful association. The early church variably used the sign of a peacock, a dove, the athlete's victory palm, or even the fish as its identifying symbol.

Around the second century the persecuted Christians preferred to paint the biblical themes like Noah's ark, Abraham killing the ram instead of Isaac, Daniel in the Lion's den, the three Hebrew boys in a furnace, Jonah being swallowed up by a fish, some baptisms, a shepherd carrying a lamb, and several more. They no doubt felt these were representative of Christ's redemptive work of grace.

The acceptance of a Christian symbol would have to be universal. The emblem would need to speak of Jesus Christ. Before settling on the cross as a universal symbol, Christians might also have chosen the manger in which the baby Jesus was laid, or a boat from which He taught the crowds in Galilee. Then there was the stone, which, having been rolled from the front of Joseph's tomb, would have proclaimed His resurrection. Other possibilities were the throne, a symbol of divine sovereignty, or the dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the day of Jesus' baptism and on the day of Pentecost, but they wished to commemorate the central importance of His death, His crucifixion. The crucifix, a cross to which a figure of Christ is attached, does not appear to have been used before the sixth century.⁴

Tradition calls crucifixion the most frightful and inhumane form of punishment ever known to the ancient world. "Crucifixion was practiced by the ancient Egyptians, Carthaginians, Persians, Germans, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans. The Romans employed this form of punishment on a colossal scale."⁵ It was probably the most cruel form of execution ever practiced.

With the development of Roman jurisprudence and the growth of Roman civilization came a gradual lessening of the punishment of free citizens. Roman citizens were exiled; they were exempt from crucifixion except in extreme cases of treason. Cicero wrote of the cross, "Let the very name of the cross be far away not only from the body of a Roman citizen but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ear" (Pro-Rabiri, 5).⁶ The government established laws prohibiting the magistrates from putting any Roman citizen to death. "The principles underlying these laws were the offering of a proud and patriotic sentiment which exempted the masters of the world from the extreme penalties reserved for barbarians and slaves."⁷ "Instead, the Romans reserved crucifixion for slaves, robbers, assassins, rebellious provincials, and the like. Only rarely were Roman citizens subjected to this kind of treatment."⁸ The word *crucifixion* recalled the most frightful memories, while at the same time it revealed the sweetest and most sublime hope of the human race.

If the Romans regarded crucifixion with horror, so did the Jews, though for a different reason. The Jews made no distinction between a "tree" and a "cross," and so between a hanging and a crucifixion. According to Josephus, crucifixion as a form of

⁴ Stott, pp. 20-21.

⁵ Walter M. Chandler, *The Trials Of Jesus*. (Norcross; Georgia, The Harrison Company, Publishers), p. 24.

⁶ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia Of The Bible*. cd, [ZPEB], (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 5 vols., 976), 1:1038.

⁷ Chandler p. 27.

⁸ Tenney, 1:1036.

punishment was unknown to the ancient Hebrews, though crucifixion in Palestine was a most common sight, (Wars. 17.10:10; 20. 5.2; Antiq., 2.12. 6; 13. 2.14,9; 5.11.1).⁹

In the Jewish world during the Old Testament period, there is no evidence the Jews fastened people to a stake or a cross as a means of execution. The Law directed death be stoning (Lev. 20.2; Deut 22.24) but the Law did permit the public display (or “hanging”) of a lawbreaker’s body “on a tree” (Deut. 21.22), strictly commanding that the “body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day” (Deut. 21.23 and John 19.31). The Jews despised the execution on a tree as public shame (Num. 25. 4). They could not bring themselves to believe that God’s Messiah would die under His curse, nailed upon a tree.

The Jewish leadership rejected Christ because they felt no need to be delivered from their sin. Alfred Edersheim said:

“According to the *Jewish(emphasis added) Talmud*, the *Talmud* expressly teaches the evil desire or impulse *in man(emphasis added)*, was created by God Himself; while it is also asserted that, on seeing the consequences, God actually repented having done so. This gives quite another character to sin, as due to causes for which no blame attaches to man. On the other hand, *man(emphasis added)* as it is in the power of each wholly to overcome sin, and to gain life by study and by works.”¹⁰

Therefore, the Jewish leadership had no proper concept of sin and felt no need for repentance. They felt that their study and religious works left no room for the coming Messiah, because the coming of the Messiah to them did not depend on repentance or any other condition. So when the Christ arrived and spoke of repentance and showing forth fruit worthy of your repentance, it was an attitude foreign to them. The demands of Christ did not fit into their theology and life, and as a result, they opposed and rejected Christ.

Mode and Form of Crucifixion

The word “cross” comes from the Greek word *stauros*, which means a stake, and from the Latin word *crux*. Merrill Ungers explained, there were four forms of the cross: the simple, or *simplex*, which was represented by the **I** stroke; the *decussate*, which was represented by the **X** stroke; the *commissa*, which was represented by the **T** stroke; and the *immissa*, which was represented by the + stroke which appeared as letters in both the Greek and Latin alphabets.¹¹ The cross was widely known in the pre-Christian times as an emblem and a heathen sign. James Orr developed this point further:

“Among the Romans crucifixion was preceded by a painful scourging, undoubtedly to hasten impending death. The victim then bore his own cross, or at least the upright beam, to the place of execution. This in itself proves that the

⁹ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews And Antiquities Of The Jews*. ed., 4 vols., (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Baker Book House Company, 1974).

¹⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah*, (McLean: Virginia, Mac Donald Publishing Company, 1886), p. 167.

¹¹ Merrill F. Ungers, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*. (Chicago: Illinois, The Moody Press, 1985), p. 227.

structure was less ponderous than is commonly supposed. When he was tied to the cross nothing further was done and he was left to die from starvation. If he was nailed to the cross, at least in Judea, a stupefying drink was given him to deaden the agony. The number of nails used seems to have been indeterminate. A table, on which the feet rested or on which the body was partly supported, seems to have been a part of the cross to keep the wounds from tearing through the transfixed members (Iren., *Adv, haer.*, ii. 42). . . The arteries of the head and stomach were surcharged with blood and a terrific throbbing headache ensued. The mind was confused and filled with anxiety and dread foreboding. The victim of crucifixion literally died a thousand deaths. . . The length of this agony was wholly determined by the constitution of the victim, but death rarely ensued before thirty-six hours had elapsed. . . . Death was sometimes hastened by breaking the legs of the victims and by a hard blow delivered under the armpit before crucifixion. . . The sudden death of Christ evidently was a matter of astonishment (Mk. 15. 44). The peculiar symptoms mentioned by John (19.34) would seem to point to a rupture of the heart, of which the Saviour died, independent of the cross itself, or perhaps hastened by its agony.¹²

The cross as the sign of redemptive grace was the concentric pivotal center of the preaching of the apostles and the early life of the New Testament church.

It seems certain that, at least from the second century onwards, Christians not only drew, painted, and engraved the cross as a pictorial symbol of their faith, but they also made the sign of the cross on themselves and others. One of the first witnesses to this practice was Tertullian, the North African lawyer-theologian who wrote about AD 200. He wrote: “At every forward step and movement at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit down at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [the cross].”¹³ The sign on the forehead was the sign of their passion; the sign was the sign of the cross. It was Tertullian who “found it necessary to defend the Christians against the heathen charge of worshipping the cross.”¹⁴ Because the pagans charged the Christians in that age with superstitious confidence in the magical virtue of the sign of the cross, the scorn of the cross offends all human good.

Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to exalt the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith, according to Eusebius, (the great early Christian historian of the fourth century) on the eve of the Battle of Milvian Bridge, near Rome. Schaff said, “Emperor Constantine was in earnestly praying to the true God for light and help at this critical time, saw, together with his army, he saw in clear daylight towards evening, a shining cross in the heavens above the sun, the sky, with these words in *hoc signo vinces*, “conquer by this sign.” The following night Christ Himself appeared to him while he slept, and directed him to have a standard prepared in the form of this sign of the cross, and with that he proceed against Maxentius and all other enemies.¹⁵ The sign was a combination of two Greek letters, (*X* is chi and *P* is rho), which is symbolic of the name

¹² James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. ed., 8 vols., (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939), by J. L. Nuelsen and E. Y. Mullins, 2:761-762.

¹³ Tertullian, *De Corona*, Chapter III, p. 94. As quoted by Stott, p., 21.

¹⁴ Philip Schaff *History Of The Christian Church*, 8 vols., (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 2: 270.

¹⁵ Schaff 3:20-22.

Xpistos or Christ. So it looked sort of like this ✠.¹⁶ He adopted the sign as his emblem and had the sign of the cross emblazoned on the standards of his army. This is reported to have taken place in October, AD 312. This victory brought Constantine supremacy in the West.

Constantine was the chief instrument of God for raising the church from the low estate of oppression and persecution to well-deserved honor and power. And for this service, a thankful posterity has given him the surname of “the Great,” because of his appreciation and protection of Christianity.

The Christian choice of the cross as its symbol was an ironic development; as alluded to earlier, this word recalls the most frightful memories. The Romans despised and scorned the cross; therefore, the use of the cross as symbolic of exaltation or conquest was uncomfortable to them, just as the cross is uncomfortable to the people of this day and age. But just as the scorn of the cross was certainly relevant to the people in the days of Rome, so also is the scorn of the cross relevant to the people of this day and age.

No wonder Paul’s “message of the cross and its redeeming grace” was to many of his listeners “a scorn,” “foolishness,” even a “stumbling block,” and to others “an offense” (1 Cor. 1.18, 23, Gal. 5.11). “How could any sane person worship a god, a dead man who had been justly condemned as a criminal and subject to the most humiliating form of execution? This combination of death, crime and shame put him beyond the pale of respect, let alone of worship.”¹⁷ But in the cross, God poured Himself out in and through the Messiah in a self-giving way to demonstrate God’s amazing grace.

The death of Christ on the cross and His work of redeeming grace remain very much a mystery. Christians believe that the cross is one of the pivotal events in history, and that the cross and crucifixion are historical facts. The challenge and the demand of the scorn of cross are as uncomfortable to us in the twentieth century as they were in the first, but are as relevant today as even they were then.¹⁸ In John Bunyan’s great classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian’s heavy burden fell off at the cross of Jesus and was seen no more because of God’s amazing grace. Afterwards, he went on his way with freedom and joy. The thought of the scorn of the cross insults human pride. The cross is a scandal, indeed - but it is a mysterious scandal.

continued in Part II

¹⁶ J. D. Douglas, *International Dictionary Encyclopedia Of The Church*, (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 2: 270.

¹⁷ Martin Hengel, as quoted by John R W. Stott in *The Cross Of Christ*, p., 23.

¹⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, (Chicago: Illinois, Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity Press, 1958), p., 86-87.