

The Centrality of the Cross

by Jessie Penn-Lewis

The Cross is the central pivot of God's dealing with the universe, and it is the key to our victory over sin, the world, the flesh, and Satan.

Scripture: Romans 4:25, Romans 5:6

Topics: "Victory in Christ", "The Cross"

Description

Jessie Penn-Lewis emphasizes the centrality of the Cross in the Christian faith, asserting that it serves as the fixed point for understanding justification, victory over sin, and reconciliation with God. She highlights that Christ's death was a substitutionary sacrifice, essential for believers to grasp their identity in Him and to experience true victory over sin, the world, and the devil. By recognizing the Cross as the pivotal aspect of their faith, Christians can find strength and liberation from the bondage of sin and the influences of the world. Penn-Lewis encourages believers to embrace the reality of their union with Christ in His death and resurrection, which empowers them to live victoriously. Ultimately, she calls for a deeper understanding of the Cross as the key to unlocking the mysteries of faith and the Christian life.

Transcript

LET us turn first to Romans 4: 25, to the declared fact of the atoning death of Christ. I was struck in looking lately at Dr. Forsyth's book on "The Cruciality of the Cross", in which he says, "a true grasp of the Atonement meets the age in its need of a centre, of an authority, or a creative force, a guiding line and a final goal. IT MEETS OUR LACK OF A FIXED POINT". This is exactly the case. We need a 'fixed point', which acts as a centre and a goal, and that 'point' in the history of the world-back to the ages before it, and forward to the ages following it-is the Cross of Calvary. It is the central pivot of the dealing of God with the universe in every aspect. It is because we Christians get away from the 'fixed point' of the Cross, that we wander into all kinds of cul-de-sac places, where we lose the balance and right perspective of truth. At this, opening meeting we will gather around this fixed point-the Cross of Christ-so that we may get to know more of the Christ of the Cross. From this the Holy Spirit will enable us to open out other aspects of truth in their relationship to the Cross.

Let us begin at Romans 4: 25 (Conybeare's translation), which reads thus, "Our Lord Jesus; Who was given up to death for our transgressions, and raised again to life for our justification". Throughout the epistles of Paul we find this repeated again and again. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ was a substitutionary and a propitiatory sacrifice.

The Cross is therefore central for justification, and central for the forgiveness of sins, and the justification of the sinner. Again read Romans 5: 6-8, "While we were yet helpless [in our sins], Christ at the appointed time died for sinners. Now hardly for a righteous man will any be found to die [although some perchance would endure death for the good], but God gives proof of His own love to us, because, while we were yet sinners, Christ DIED FOR us". Then in verse 9, "Much more, now that we have been justified in His blood, (i.e., By participation in His blood; that is, being made partakers of His death.) shall we be saved through Him from the wrath of God. For if, when we were His enemies, we were reconciled to God by the DEATH of His Son, much more being already reconciled, shall we be saved, by SHARING IN HIS LIFE".

The words are so plain and obvious in their meaning, that to an open mind, it is clear that Christ died for us; we are "justified in His blood"; when we were enemies we were "reconciled to God by the death of His Son", and, being reconciled, we are saved by "sharing in His life". These are declared basic facts, showing that Christ's death on Calvary was a death for sinners, and a reconciliation with God of sinners in a state of enmity against Him; and a salvation for those sinners through the impartation of a 'share' of the life which Christ, as their Substitute, obtained for them out of His death.

Now let us pass on to see the Cross as the centre, or 'fixed point', for VICTORY OVER SIN, OVER THE WORLD, OVER THE FLESH, AND OVER THE DEVIL. For a clear unveiling of the Cross as the 'fixed point' for the Christian's victory over sin, we turn to Romans 6. It is the basic chapter in the whole of the New Testament, where the deep meaning of the death at Calvary is set forth, in language which is extraordinary in its simplicity and clearness, and marvellous in its comprehensive explanation of the gospel. No wonder that the "god of this world" has influenced so many to relegate Romans 6 to the theologians, so as to keep believers from understanding its simple truth, because the deceiver knows it to be the CRUCIAL MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL from the experimental standpoint.

God-ward, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ was the atonement, and the propitiation for sin, but in Romans 6 we are shown the Cross in its manward aspect-in its dealing with the sinner. Here is the practical, deep and vital message to the sinner, showing him the way of deliverance from the power of sin, from the world, the flesh and the devil. Here in the Romans 6 message of Calvary, Paul laid the foundation deep and, strong. Here lies the bed-rock depth of the Cross, as the 'fixed point' for the personal life of the believer, personal equipment, and personal victory in every aspect of need.

Let us read the passage slowly and carefully: Verses 1-2, "What shall we say then? Shall we persist in sin that the gift of grace may be more abundant? God forbid! WE WHO HAVE DIED TO SIN." Here is the Cross in its aspect of the death of the sinner with the Saviour. It is clear from this that Christ's Cross was the sinner's cross, not, of course, in the matter of atonement God-ward, but in the taking of the old creation life to the Cross, that the believer should be delivered from the power of sin; and that, not by conquering it, but by dying to it. Here is the key to victory. The deepest things are the simplest.

The real trouble about understanding the sixth of Romans is not a theological, but a moral one. When we sincerely want deliverance from the power of sin, it is within our reach. It lies just here for the simple soul who will take the statements as a fact. For the sake of a lost world, let us have no 'moral' hindrances to our knowing the reality of the Cross. If men and women would be utterly willing for the deepest work of the Cross to be wrought in or applied to them, there would be a trembling of the powers of hell, a shaking of the kingdom of darkness. The pivotal secret of God's plan for the redemption of a lost world lies in the meaning of Romans 6. The central fact of the Cross being the sinner's cross, as well as the Saviour's.

Moreover, this Romans 6 meaning of the Cross must be recognized as the root foundation of the Christian life, just as the 'root' is necessary to the life of the tree. A tree cannot part with its root, but must strike it deeper into the ground, so that all external growth may have strong support in the earth, and strong life-force for its maintenance.

" We who have died to sin," how can we any longer live under the mastery of sin? Or "have you forgotten that all of us ... were baptized into fellowship with His death?" writes the Apostle. 'All of us'-not the few who wish to be advanced souls, but young converts also! If every convert to Christ was 'born again' through the gospel message of this chapter, and they knew its power in experience at the very beginning of their Christian lives, there would be less backsliding, and need of careful nursing lest they fell away, for a new life would be imparted to them in stronger power, and Christ as the Living One would be known as a real Saviour.

I saw this in Finland some years ago, when the daughter of a professor sat in the front row of the Conference meetings. I was speaking, by translation into Finnish and Swedish, on the corn of wheat falling into the ground to die. There were delegates from all parts of Finland there. The occasion was such that I sought to make the most of my rare opportunity, and so I opened out all that I knew of the deeper meaning of the Cross. Someone said, "Will you speak to that girl, she is unconverted". I said, "No, not today, I will wait!" At the end of the third day, the people were passing out, when the girl came along, and flung her arms around my neck, and burst into tears. I said, "What is it, dear? Have you come to Christ?" "Yes, I have." "Thank God! What did you see that led you to Him?" And she replied, "The corn of wheat falling into the ground to die". She was born again through the revelation of the Spirit of God, that "when Christ went to Calvary, He took the sinner too". The result was that this soul became more 'full-grown' in three months, than the majority of Christians we meet today. When she was only three months old as a Christian, she was able to translate into Swedish (and to make arrangements for the publishing of) the whole of the book, The Cross of Calvary, and to do it intelligently and fully. This shows us what sort of converts they had in Pentecostal days. They were 'born' in Paul's time on the truths of Romans 6.

Let us read the passage again: "We who have died to sin ... or have you forgotten that all of us, when we were baptized into fellowship with Christ Jesus, were baptized into fellowship with His death? With Him therefore we were buried by the baptism wherein we shared His death; that even as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we likewise might walk in newness of life". Now listen carefully to the next words-"For if we have been grafted into the likeness of His death, so shall we also share His resurrection".

Note the repetition of the words about the Cross, making it the 'fixed point' of the message. " We who died"-Calvary! "His death"-Calvary! "Shared His death"-Calvary! "Grafted. into ... His death"-Calvary! And again in verses 6 and 8, "Crucified with Christ"-Calvary! "Shared the death of Christ" -Calvary! How clear it is. The Cross of Christ is the sinner's Cross. And why? Because the whole Adam life of nature is absolutely fallen. It cannot be improved. It is fallen and poisoned by the serpent in root and branch. The whole scheme of redemption lies in the fact that God must begin again, so to speak, and make a new creation. Through the Cross He plans to bring to an end the old Adam life of the fallen race, and build again a new creation in the midst of its ruins. There is not even a 'divine spark' in the fallen man which He can fan into life as the basis for the new.

This fact is vital for the understanding of God's plan of redemption through His Son's death upon a Cross. The devil opposes the doctrine of the Fall, because he knows that if men believe there was no 'Fall', they

have no sense of need of the Cross. The two hang together. We must therefore be brought by the Holy Spirit to the place where we realize that we have nothing in us that can be 'improved', and be willing to come to that Cross, and to say "when He went to Calvary, He took the sinner too". Oh defeated child of God, take the simple fact of faith in His words, that you died with Christ upon His Cross; that you were baptized 'into His death'-put right into Him, and buried out of sight-and there leave yourself, reckoning that you have died unto sin, and as far as you are concerned, have finished with it. Then reckon upon union with Him in resurrection, i.e., that you have in Him a new life. If we would put it briefly, we might say that when you take the attitude, or place of death, God undertakes to put into you all that He wants out of you.

What a gospel for the people! Let us give it to them. It is truly a gospel of glad tidings-the Cross the place of victory over sin as well as the place of reconciliation with God.

The Cross as the 'fixed point' for VICTORY OVER THE WORLD. In every one of the epistles of Paul we find that he refers to the finished work of Christ at Calvary, in one aspect or another. Everything he says in all his letters revolves around the centre of the Cross. In Galatians especially, are so many references to the Cross in its basal relationship to vital aspects of the Christian life, that the epistle might be called the Epistle of the Cross. In Galatians 6: 14 we get the strongest passage about the believer's death to the world. The Apostle writes about himself, but what was true for Paul is true for us. In this instance Paul saw the 'world' in the proselytizing methods of the Judaistic believers, and their desire to escape the persecution of the Jews "which Christ bore upon the Cross". "But as for me," says the Apostle, "far be it from me to boast, save only in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; whereby the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

The believer's death with Christ upon His Cross therefore means a being crucified to the world in all its aspects. Not to be a miserable, joyless person, but one filled with the joy and glory of another world. It is not the 'cross' that makes us miserable, but the absence of it. It is a delivering Cross-a Cross that liberates you to have the very foretaste of heaven in you, as already sharers of the power of the age to come. Let each one of us put in our claim for deliverance from the world, so that, as Christians, we do not pander to it, dress like it, act like it, and behave like it. If this message of Calvary was taught and believed, it would end the question of amusements in the church.

Note also that to experience this, it must be a real fellowship with Christ in His death. And those who have proved it know that this application of the Cross does actually cut you off from the 'world', there is a 'gulf' between you and the world, and you can see the people of the world on the other side. Thus looking at the world from the Cross, you can go to the world of mankind, 'sent' as Christ was sent, to reveal the heart of God, with His compassion of love and His Spirit of Sacrifice. In going to souls, too, from your place in Christ, you will find yourself alongside of their need, for your own 'needs' have been fully met in your union with the Risen Lord. Glory to God for the Cross that severs us from the world, and the world-spirit, and makes a way for us into another world where all is peace and joy and love.

In Galatians, also, we find Paul showing us the Cross as the CENTRE OF DELIVERANCE FROM THE RULE OF THE 'FLESH'. "They who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts" (Gal-5: 24). Those who apprehend this meaning of death with Christ, have proved that it is practically possible for them to walk at liberty with no 'desires of the flesh' having mastery over them. In verse 16 of this chapter, we read of the conflict there is bound to be between 'flesh' and 'spirit'. Each are essentially opposed the one to the other. When the spirit dominates, the desires of the flesh are in abeyance. Verse 24 reveals the secret of this dominance of the spirit, as possible through the Cross. The 'flesh' is not to be

only kept dormant, but 'crucified'. This is necessary even concerning the lawful questions of food and drink. If the children of God knew this, there would be an end of dishonour to the Lord's Name, in their bondage to 'fads' and 'fancies', and grumbles over the material things concerning the body. Alas, the 'flesh' is pandered to among God's children in a way that often spoils their testimony for Christ. Victory in this respect is also essential in the aggressive warfare against the powers of darkness, for if the believer is under bondage to a single thing-either lawful or unlawful to them as children of God they are powerless. "They who are Christ's have crucified the Flesh, with its passions and its lusts," i.e., desires. This deals with 'habits' and desires of the physical nature of every kind. Smoking is surely one, and the terrible slavery to opiates and alcohol. It is true that whilst the 'flesh' is to be crucified in an ethical sense, we do 'walk in the flesh' in a physical and lawful sense, but even 'physically' or 'lawfully', the 'flesh' is not to 'walk' over us, in any one particular. (See 2 Corinthians 10: 3; and I Corinthians 6: 12.)

Then lastly: THE CROSS AS THE CENTRE OF VICTORY OVER SATAN. The passage in the epistles which shows this clearly is Colossians 2: 14-15- "He forgave us all our transgressions, and blotted out the Writing against us ... having taken it out of our way, and nailed it to the Cross. And He disarmed the Principalities and the Powers, and put them to open shame, leading them captive in the triumph of Christ." These words take us back to the triumphant statement of our Lord in John 12:31-33, where He said on the eve of the Cross, "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me. This He said, signifying what death He should die". And again in John 16: 8-11 , He said "When He [the Spirit of truth] is come He ... will convict (R.V.) the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment ... of judgment because the prince of this world is [hath been] judged". So the Holy Spirit has not only to deal with the soul God-ward, convicting it of the sin of not believing God; or man-ward-convincing him that Christ is his righteousness in the Father's Presence, but He has to CONVINCHE him of the conquest of his foe at Calvary. This fact is not hidden under ambiguous language in the Word of God. In John 12:31. the Lord states plainly what would occur at the Cross, and in John 16: 11 ,He emphasizes and repeats His statement.

THE DEVIL AND ALL HIS HIERARCHIC POWERS WERE DISARMED AT THE PLACE CALLED CALVARY. In the face of all that Satan is doing in the world, and his (apparent) increased power, only the conviction of the Holy Spirit as to Christ's victory at Calvary can keep us in heart rest, and enable us to triumph, and to endure. Moreover, if you believe in Christ's victory over Satan, you will find more and more how essential it is that you know the Cross to crucify the old Adam-life, so that joined in spirit to the Victorious Christ, you are lifted above, and enabled to triumph over the foe, and prove that, as far as you are concerned, the prince of this world has been cast out. He is conquered. According to His own words Christ did put him, and all his powers, to an 'open shame', just when, in the eyes of the world, they apparently triumphed over Him.

I have only briefly touched upon these three aspects of the Cross, to show that it is central in all these things. It is vital and central in connection with justification by faith; vital and central in connection with our victory over sin; vital and central in relation to our personal lives and our external habits; vital and central in connection with victory over our foe. Believers who know these aspects of the Cross find themselves standing on the solid foundation of the finished work of Christ, so that all hell cannot shake or overthrow them. However varied their experiences may be, the foundation of God standeth sure. They are on the rock-ground of His finished work at Calvary, comprising not only a complete atonement Godward, but victory and deliverance from the world, the flesh and the devil. Even though subjectively it may not be wrought out in their experience in all its fulness, they rely upon all its completeness as theirs, when they

lay hold of any specific aspect in the hour of need. Their faith is in what Christ has done, not their experience of it. They know that the "Word of the Cross ... is the dunamis of God". The full 'logos' of the Cross-not man's thought of the Cross, nor even the preaching of it, but the 'Word' of the Cross itself the "Cross" and all that it involved for Christ and for the sinner; the Logos of the Cross as expressing God's inward thought as to the way in which He could deliver fallen man from the results of the Fall, and defeat his foe, who, fallen from high estate before him, was the cause of his fall. The fallen Archangel was defeated, and the fallen Adam crucified at Calvary.

This "Logos of the Cross", says Dr. Mabie, is "conceived by Paul to be the key which unlocks the riddle of the universe, solves all mysteries, and reconciles all things", and "to Paul it was given to preach that solvent". The world needs to-day to know this 'solvent' of all its mysteries.

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