

Surveying the cross

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Last week we looked at the song 'Joy to the world' by Isaac Watts and the Psalm on which it was based. The songs we sing in Worship to our Lord are often written about a particular passage of Scripture and they remind us of that passage and its importance of it to us. Others are written to remind us of subjects we need to consider and be reminded of. The title of today's lesson comes from just such a song. This song was also written by Isaac Watts nearly 300 years ago and I think you will agree with me that the subject of this song is just as important for us in our day as it was in the day it was written. Here are it's words -

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride

See from His head His hands His feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e're such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a tribute far too small
Love so amazing so divine
Demands my soul my life my all
Love so amazing so divine
Demands my soul my life my all

While the word survey does not appear in Scripture the idea behind it certainly does. When we think of the word survey what comes to mind. For me there are two general types.

1. A survey is taken to find out people's opinion of something.
2. You survey a piece of land to see if it is suitable to built something upon.

The common theme of these two is that both involve making a choice. And Scripture is full of examples when people are called upon to make choices.

Adam and Eve choose to listen to God about the tree
Cain choose not to have sin be your master
Moses choose life or death
Joshua choose this day who you shall follow
Jeremiah choose to follow the ancient ways
Who do you say I am Jesus ask his disciples...

But surveying also carries with it the idea of evaluating something. When one looks deeper into something to see what it really is all about before making that choice about it.

Most songs found in the songbooks of church pews list a scriptural reference for it's songs. And often different songbooks cite different references for the same song. For instance this particular song 'When I survey the wondrous cross' in our red songbooks cites Philippians 3:7 while others use Galatians 6:14 as their reference.

We will begin today's lesson by looking at these two verses and their context to begin surveying of the cross and its message.

Galatians 6:14 *"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which (through whom) the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."*

The idea of a crucifixion presents horrible images in our minds. And rightly so for I can only imagine how painful the suffering of dying in such a way could be. And this just might be why Paul used it as an example for explaining how hard it is for us to separate ourselves from this world to follow Jesus. 'pick up your cross and follow me' are very hard words to swallow.

Here is that passage from Galatians in its context -

Galatians 6:11-18 *"See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen."*

The words of Paul here come at the closing of his letter to the church at Galatia. A church which was located in the middle of what today we call the country of Turkey. Paul closed this letter with the words above that we just read and opens this letter with the words below -

"Paul, an apostle— not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." (Galatians 1:1-5)

Paul refers to them living in a present evil age here in his opening. Paul met much resistance to his spreading of the gospel, and this resistance came from several directions. One of those directions was from among the people of his own nation, fellow Jews. For many of them rejected Jesus as the Christ and wanted to continue under the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. A covenant where physical circumcision was seen as being of great importance to them as he refers to in the closing of this letter to the Galatian church. Paul addresses this issue in a number of places in his letters. For example in his letter to the Romans 2:25-29 Paul writes that the type circumcision God is looking for is circumcision of the heart not of the flesh. Then Paul answers the question immediately raised after declaring this - *“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”*

Here Paul hits on the heart of the matter - God’s Word is what matters. The very oracles (Words of God) will lead us to the right conclusion on all matters if we will but let it do so. And this certainly is true of understanding the cross of Jesus and what it means for you, I, and the entire world.

Paul realized the world had been crucified to him, cut off, separated from him, because of the Word of God as he stated above with these words - *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which (through whom) the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*

That Word that was made flesh and dwelt among us as John states in John 1:14. Therefore what now mattered to Paul was the new creation he had become by the Grace of God through Jesus Christ, that very word that was made flesh and put on a cross to die for our sins. Or as the Hebrew writer describes it when speaking of what Jesus did when he came to earth - *‘a body you have prepared for me’*. And that body hung on that cross instead of yours and mine. Fulfilling the words spoken through the prophet Isaiah - *‘by his wounds we are healed’*. Let me tell you about that Paul says!

Now let us look at Philippians 3:7 and it’s context - *“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”*

“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain

Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Scripture tells us a number of things about this man Paul. He was born a Jew around the same time as Jesus had walked the earth. And Paul being a Jewish man himself would understand, as he states in Romans 3 above, that the first thing of value to him as a Jew was that he had been given the very words of God.

Yet despite having been born a Jew and the impressive credentials he had acquired for himself among his peers as a fellow Jew he had failed to see and understand the message of the cross during a good portion of his life. In the passage below from Acts Luke recounts Paul’s previous actions prior to understanding Christ crucified -

In Acts 22:1-5 Paul’s companion Luke records a speech Paul made at Jerusalem before a crowd in which Paul speaks about himself - “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.”

None of us likes to find out we have been wrong about something. Particularly if that something turns out to be of great importance to us. Paul in writing to the church in Corinth makes this observation. (1st Corinthians 1:18-25)

*“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” (Isaiah 29:14)*

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

This letter of Paul's was obviously written after he had become a Christian. But notice how Paul describes what it is that he is preaching - Christ crucified!

Many in this world reject or discount what the Word of God says. And the message of the cross is foolishness to them. They do so for many reasons, reasons too numerous to even begin to list here. I know this to be true for like Paul I was among those who did so at one time.

I think one of the biggest reasons for rejecting God's Word is that the Word of God challenges what we already believe about things. It challenges us to see who we really are. In Paul's letter to the Romans Paul addresses this very thing. And what he finds out about himself is not good. Here are his words and the solution to this problem.

"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." (Romans 7:7-25)

God's Word did not make Paul a sinner. It only made him aware that he was one. There is a time in our lives when we are unaware of sin and that we are sinners. However once we become aware of it being so, then we have a choice to make. God invites us all to survey the cross of Jesus. The one that Mr. Isaac Watts referred to as being - "on which the prince of Glory died". My prayer for all of us is that we take that opportunity today to do so. To better understand what the cross of Jesus is really all about.