

When God Flexes His Muscles

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The most familiar symbol in the world today is not the Stars and Stripes; it is not the hammer and the sickle; it is not the Union Jack; and it is not the dollar sign.

The royal banner of the cross “towering over the wrecks of time” is more widely known on every continent and every isle of the sea than any other symbol. It is associated with the death of Christ though there is a wide diversity and disparity of its interpretation. No religion has ever had a symbol or an emblem that has encompassed so much of the earth’s surface, that has been familiar to so many people over so long a time. The crescent of Islam runs a poor second, and that may be the reason they try harder.

Yet no one fully knows the meaning of the cross. No one today can adequately interpret the suffering and the death of Christ. No theologian, no matter how profound he might be, has ever been able to plumb the depths of the meaning of the death of Christ. It is still a profound mystery.

The Mystery of the Cross

The apostle Paul, who had written most of the epistles that deal with the death and the resurrection of Christ, could say at the conclusion of his life, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Philippians 3:10).

I would suggest a twofold reason for the mystery of the cross. First of all, the cross has always been foolishness to the world. That is exactly what the Word of God says: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness...” (1 Corinthians 1: 18). And then Paul goes on to say, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him...” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore the cross is not quite what the world wants in the way of religion. They were looking for Him to come, even the first time, riding a white charger to bring victory and deliverance to the earth from the iron heel of Rome. But He came riding upon a little donkey, and He was on the way to a cross. That did not appeal then. It does not appeal today.

Then there is a second reason for the mystery of the cross. God has drawn a veil of silence and a curtain of darkness over it. None of the four Gospels – neither Matthew, Mark, Luke nor John – actually records the events of the crucifixion itself. If you will read them again, you will see that they state that He was crucified and give some isolated and unrelated events which are connected with the death of Christ, but they do not describe the crucifixion itself. Today we are not permitted to sit down with that religious crowd of whom it was said, “And sitting down they watched him there” (Matthew 27:36). Even this crowd was shut out, in that they were denied the right to see the sad spectacle of the death of the Son of God. God drew the curtain of night over the cross. At high noon He blotted out the sun, and our Lord died in the darkness of those three hours. Artists through the centuries have attempted to place on canvas the horrendous death of the Savior of the world. Man has attempted to describe it in vivid verbiage, but none has done it justice. You and I will probably never know, even in eternity, the extent of His suffering.

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark the night the Lord passed through,

Ere He found His sheep that was lost.
– Elizabeth C. Clephane

The Suffering Christ

Isaiah, seven hundred years before Christ was born in Bethlehem, lets you see something of the suffering of Christ that you will find nowhere else. Of course, the question immediately arises: How do you know that Isaiah was speaking of Christ? It is interesting that all of the rabbis, up to the early Christian centuries, said that Isaiah 53 spoke of the Messiah who was to come. But when they found that Christians were interpreting it in reference to the Lord Jesus, they immediately changed their view. However, the New Testament has too many references to Isaiah 53 to discount it.

We find that John in his Gospel told about the rejection of the Lord Jesus:

But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him; that the saying of Isaiah, the prophet, might be fulfilled, which he spoke, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? (John 12:37, 38)

This is a quotation of Isaiah 53:1.

Paul does the same thing in Romans 10:16. In describing the gospel of the death and the resurrection of Christ, he writes, "...For Isaiah saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?"

Then there was that Ethiopian eunuch riding across the desert, having left Jerusalem, the religious capital of the world, but still in spiritual darkness. He was reading Isaiah 53 (though in his day the Scripture was not divided into chapters). And Philip, guided by the Holy Spirit, was led to join himself to that chariot as a hitchhiker. When he got up into the chariot, immediately this Ethiopian eunuch said to him, "Look, here is where I'm reading, and here is what it says":

...He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth; in his humiliation his judgment was taken away, and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the earth. (Acts 8:32, 33)

Then the Ethiopian asked Philip, "Was the prophet speaking of himself or of another man?" The very interesting thing is Philip's response: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). May I say to you, Jesus is the subject of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. The theme here is the suffering Savior, and it reveals the humanity of Christ in a wonderful, wonderful way. It tells why He took upon Himself humanity. Anselm, one of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, in his book entitled, *Cur Deus Homo – Why God Became Man*, offered one explanation: "Isaiah 53, He came to redeem lost mankind." That is the picture that is here. I say reverently that here you have His life all the way from the cradle to the grave and beyond.

"His Visage...So Marred"

Isaiah 53 actually begins in the chapter that precedes it. I want to lift out just one verse, Isaiah 52:14. Think about this:

As many were astounded at thee – his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.

No one – and I don't care who it is – has ever been marred more than Jesus was on the cross. This is a startling and shocking statement. I am of the opinion that after the three hours of darkness, when the light broke on the cross, the crowd looked up at the One hanging there and they gasped in horror. At that time He was probably little more than a quivering mass of human flesh. He had borne hell for you and me. He had paid the penalty for the sins of the world.

This was made real in my own heart during my first pastorate. I had a call from the hospital early one morning, about 4:30, requesting me to come there. One of my elders was captain of the fire department, and they sketched his accident rather briefly. His company had been called out early that morning, and he had gone out riding on the ladder truck. The driver of a milk truck, not hearing the siren, drove right out in the way. The fire engine driver, attempting to miss the truck, caused the entire rig to flip over, and these men who were riding on the back were dragged over that rough asphalt. When I got to the hospital his father was sitting at the bedside. I walked in, looked down at Will Norris and became deathly sick. I had to leave. I could

not even tell where his face was. All you could see was a mass of flesh that was breathing, and he didn't breathe long. In less than an hour he was gone. As I drove home I thought to myself, *That is the most horrible sight I have ever seen!* And up to this day it is still the most horrible sight I have ever seen.

But, my friend, as I drove home I thought about Isaiah 52:14, that my Lord was marred more than any man: "As many were astounded at thee – his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men." Jesus looked worse than Will Norris!

"Why Hath Believed?"

Now will you notice that the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah opens with this enigmatic inquiry:

Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

(Isaiah 53:1)

This is still not a popular message, as we have indicated. The thing that is popular today is some freak or weird interpretation of the Bible that actually contradicts the Scripture. Way-out theology gets all the publicity.

I have been watching this trend on TV now for some time and also see it in our magazines. They have had nothing that represents fundamentalism in an objective, sympathetic, fair manner in years. In other words, they start with the premise that evangelical Christians are "intellectual obscurantists," which means we don't know nothin'. Well, this is the picture that they have attempted to draw of us. The "report" that Isaiah 53 presents is still not the popular report today. I frankly believe that the way liberalism came into the church was through weak preachers and weak laymen attempting to appeal to the crowd by presenting that which was not the gospel. It

can still be said, “Who has believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”

That word “arm” in the Hebrew language is a vivid and picturesque word, meaning that God has bared His arm by rolling up His sleeve, symbolic of a tremendous undertaking. This is when God flexed His muscles.

God created the heavens and the earth, and Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” That word “handiwork” is literally “finger-work,” like a woman tatting or knitting. Creation didn’t require any effort at all for God. He merely spoke the universe into existence. But when God was ready to redeem sinners, the work required His bared arm. When you are talking about power which is infinite to begin with, it is difficult to make the distinction, but God wants us to see that it was with a greater expenditure of power and of wisdom and of sacrifice to redeem man than it was to create universes. God wants us to know that He attaches much more importance to the redemption of sinners than He does to all the rest of His creation.

“Like a Tender Plant”

Now will you notice that Isaiah 53 immediately harks back to the boyhood of Jesus:

For he shall grow up before him like a tender plant, and like a root out of a dry ground.... (Isaiah 53:2)

Here we have the birth and the boyhood of our Lord. It says that He was like a root out of a dry ground. Isaiah had said previously (11:1) that a stem, a branch, a living branch would come out of Jesse. Jesse, you recall, was the father of King David. Why was Jesse named, since the Lord Jesus is presented in the New Testament as the King coming from David? Well, by the time you get to the period when our Lord came into the world, it was in “the fullness of time,” as far as God was concerned. The family of David had returned to peasantry, no longer princes but peasants. The One in the royal line happened to be a carpenter in Nazareth.

He is a root out of a dry ground. If you want to know how dry it was, look at the nation into which He came at that time. It was dead spiritually. The religious rulers had reduced the Old Testament to a dead ritual, and they were far from God. They followed the letter of the Mosaic Law, but they had more ways of getting around it than modern man has in getting around the civil law.

Israel was not only a dead nation spiritually, but it was also under the iron heel of Rome. The people of Israel were not free. The Roman Empire produced no great civilization. They merely were good imitators of great civilizations. There was mediocre achievement and pseudo-culture. The moral foundation was gone. A virile manhood and a virtuous womanhood were supplanted by a debauched and pleasure-loving citizenry.

The reason that the apostles’ message of the grace of God fell on so many receptive ears was that people were tired of law. They had been taught to follow little, meticulously detailed programs in order to be saved rather than having a personal relationship with God. There was deadness everywhere.

Into such a situation Christ came. He came from a noble family that had been cut off, from a nation that had become a vassal to Rome, in a day and age that was decadent. The loveliest flower of humanity came from the driest spot and period of the world’s history. It was humanly

impossible for His day and generation to produce Him, but He came nevertheless, for He came forth from God.

You see, evolutionists have always had a problem with Him – actually two problems. Evolution wasn't supposed to produce Him for a few more million years. But then having “produced” Him about two thousand years ago, why hasn't there been another one like Him? May I say to you, He is a root out of a dry ground.

If you should go out and start walking across this Southern California desert without a green sprig anywhere, and suddenly you come upon a great big lovely head of iceberg lettuce growing out of that dry, dusty soil, you would be startled. You'd stop dead in your tracks and say, “Where in the world did this come from?” That is how amazing Christ's coming into the world was. There was nothing in the world to produce Him, my friend. He is a root out of a dry ground.

“There is No Beauty...”

Then Isaiah continues,

...He hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53:2)

This has led some people to draw a wrong conclusion, supposing that as a man our Lord was misshapen or diseased. May I say to you, Jesus was the perfect man. He could never have been the sacrifice for the sins of the world if He had not been perfect in every way – we know this from the Levitical requirements for a sacrificial lamb.

What is being said here is that on the cross there was no comeliness, nothing beautiful. Now I know today that the cross is a symbol that is popular. It is put up on churches, both Catholic and Protestant. They are beautiful crosses. I'm going this afternoon to dedicate a church and, although I do not know, I have a notion there will be a cross around there somewhere, and it will be a pretty one. They all are pretty now. But, my friend, the cross on which our Savior died was not pretty. “There is no beauty that we should desire him” is speaking of Him when He hung on that cross.

“Despised and Rejected”

Now will you notice verse 3,

He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This speaks of His total life. It doesn't mean that Christ was rejected only when He was crucified. Go back and read the sixty-ninth Psalm regarding the days that fill in those silent years. You'll find that from the time He was born He was rejected. Where was He born? He was born in a stable! As an adult, He could say, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). He went through this world

rejected.

Then of His ministry when He walked the dusty roads of earth, we read,

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 for our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4, 5)

Healed of what? This passage has caused some to assume that there is physical healing in the atonement. But, as I said to a friend of mine who is head of a Pentecostal theological school, “If you want to include healing in the atonement, remember that there is also a new body in the atonement, and we know that there is a new earth in the atonement, but we don’t have these blessings yet.” Certainly this passage is not referring to physical healing in the atonement. There is a very excellent note in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* that I highly recommend. Allow me to quote it, as it expresses it better than I can.

Because Matthew quotes this passage and applies it to physical disease (cp. Mt. 8:17 with context) it has been conjectured by some that disease as well as sin was included in the atoning death of Christ. But Matthew asserts that the Lord fulfilled the first part of Isaiah 53:4 during the healing ministry of His service on earth. Matthew 8:17 makes no reference to Christ’s atoning death for sin. (p. 759)

Now let’s examine that passage in Matthew and see what it means:

When the evening was come, they brought unto him many that were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah, the prophet, saying, He himself took our infirmities, and bore our sicknesses. (Matthew 8:16, 17)

Notice that it doesn’t say that He bore our sicknesses on the cross. He bore them when He walked through this earth, my friend, during those three years of His healing ministry. He was *moved* by the suffering of the human family. His heart went out to them. *Disease* is not sin; rather, it is the result of the entrance of sin way back in the Garden of Eden. When He would walk by and see the blind and see the lame, He was moved with compassion. Obviously, we have only a very sketchy account of the miracles He performed. The Gospel of John says He healed many. Luke says He healed the multitudes. I believe that one of the reasons the Pharisees could not contradict the fact He was performing miracles – and they never did – was because there were literally thousands, yes, thousands of people He had healed who were walking about everywhere. Why? Because as the Son of God, He is moved by the suffering of humanity. Ending suffering was part of His ministry during His life on earth. The Bible doesn’t say that in His *death* He heals disease.

Now let me make this very clear. The other passage of Scripture that ought always to be quoted with Isaiah 53 is 1 Peter 2:24:

Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to

sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed.

Healed of what? “Who his own self bore our sins in His own body.” When He died on the cross, He died for sin, my beloved.

Now let’s look at that death.

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. (Isaiah 53:6)

Three things in this verse are important to understand. It opens with all, and it closes with all. “All we like sheep have gone astray.” It closes with “the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” When Christ died on the cross, He took upon Himself the sins of the world. Why? Because “we have turned every one to *his own way*” – expressed here in those three words is the basic problem with the human family today. We are like Adam going out of the Garden of Eden. I would like to have said to him,

“Adam, where are you going?”

“I’m getting away from God.”

“I thought you had fellowship with Him every day?”

“I did, but no longer.”

He was going his own way, and from that day to this every man goes his own way.

The Scripture says, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 14:12). The Lord Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). When the human family turned away from God, it was then that Christ became the sacrifice for the sins of the world: “The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” At the crucifixion of our Lord it wasn’t His suffering at the hands of man during those first three hours, but it was His suffering during those last three hours in the darkness, that the cross became the altar on which the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was offered.

Three times we are told in Isaiah 53 that it was God who smote Him: In verse 4 “smitten of God, and afflicted”; in verse 6 “the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”; and verse 10 “yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him.”

“The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Consternation fills our souls when we recognize that it was God the Father who did it! “It pleased the LORD to bruise him.”

Look again at the cross.

Christ was on the cross six hours, hanging between heaven and earth from nine o’clock in the morning until three o’clock in the afternoon. In the first three hours man did his worst. He heaped ridicule and insult upon Him, spit upon Him, nailed Him without mercy to the cruel cross, and then sat down to watch Him die. At twelve o’clock noon, after Jesus had hung there for three hours in agony, God drew a veil over the sun, and darkness covered that scene, shutting out from human eye the transaction between the Father and the Son. Christ became the sacrifice for the sin of the world. God made His Son’s soul an offering for sin. Christ Jesus was treated as sin, for we are told in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that He was made sin for us – He who knew no sin.

Why did He do it? He did it because He loves you. God so loved the world that He gave His Son. God made the soul of Jesus Christ an offering for your sin!

If you want to know if God hates sin, look at the cross. If you want to know if God will punish sin, look at the Beloved of His heart enduring the tortures of its penalty. That cross became an altar where we behold the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. He was dying for somebody else – He was dying for you and me.

My friend, if God didn't spare His own Son, what do you expect at the hands of God when you stand before Him someday? Do you think that you can escape? The writer to the Hebrews asks the question. This is a question you cannot answer, I cannot answer, and even God cannot answer. I'm not being irreverent in saying that God can't answer this one, because the question is: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation...?" (Hebrews 2:3). Do you know how to escape? There is no way because Christ has taken the only route and has paid the tremendous price that you and I might be saved.

“Lamb to the Slaughter”

Notice how Isaiah uses the figure of the lamb:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

All the way from Abel to John the Baptist, Scripture uses the figure of the lamb. This was the verse which the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip climbed up into his chariot: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth; in his humiliation his judgment was taken away, and who shall declare his generation? For his life is taken from the earth" (Acts 8:32, 33).

The Ethiopian asked Philip, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or another?" Philip said it was Another who was yet to come, and he told him about Jesus who had come as the Lamb led to the slaughter.

When Abel, you recall, brought that sacrifice to the Lord, it was a lamb. Abel was no cave-man, but an intelligent human being. I think that he could meet anyone living today on an intellectual basis. After all, we are descended from that line, and what we have is inherited from him. If you had said to Abel, "Abel, I see you are offering a little lamb. Do you think a little lamb will take away your sin?"

He would have answered, "No."

"Then why are you doing it?"

His reason would have been something like this: "God has asked us to do it. He promised my mother that there is coming One who will be our Savior. This little lamb is depicting Him, and I offer it as a substitute. But there is coming One who will give Himself in voluntary, vicarious death. I don't know much about it yet, but I trust God that He is coming."

Centuries passed, and at last one day John the Baptist marked out Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This is God's Lamb. This is the One to pay the penalty for the sins of the world – your sin and my sin. With the apostle Paul we can look back at that cross and say, "He loved me, and gave Himself for me."

Jesus didn't die to win your sympathy. Remember that when Jesus was on His way to the cross and the women of Jerusalem were weeping for Him, He said, "... Weep not for me, but

weep for yourselves, and for your children....For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Luke 23:28, 31). He did not want their sympathy, and He does not want ours. Oh, I think we would be cold-blooded indeed to read the story of the crucifixion of Christ and not be moved. When Clovis, leader of the Franks, first heard about the crucifixion of Christ, he was so moved that he leaped to his feet, drew his sword and exclaimed, "If I had only been there with my Franks!" But our Lord didn't want Clovis and his army. He told His own disciple to put up his sword. He could have the protection of legions of angels, but He was not here to be delivered – except to death for you and me. He did not die to beget sympathy in your heart; He doesn't want it. His was not a martyr's death. He did not die as did the martyrs who died singing praises, conscious of God's presence with them. Rather, Jesus cried out in that awful moment, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He was forsaken of God!

He died because "all we like sheep have gone astray...and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." That's the reason He died. He had to do it to save you, my friend!

"He Shall Be Satisfied"

I do not want to close on that note. This wonderful fifty-third chapter does not stop there. It opens with suffering, but it closes with satisfaction. Note now verse 11:

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. (Isaiah 53:11)

Satisfaction.

Don't feel sorry for Him. If you think He was caught between the upper millstone of Roman power and the nether millstone of religious cupidity, forget it. He was not. He says, "No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father" (John 10:18). The Book of Hebrews says, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). He made adequate provision for the sin of the world. He is satisfied.

The cross is not an ambulance sent to a wreck. It is not first aid. It is not a temporary arrangement. The Lord Jesus is "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." And when you look into eternity you see what John describes, "And I beheld and, lo, in the midst of the throne...stood a Lamb as though it had been slain..." (Revelation 5:6). Scripture tells us that He sat down at God's right hand, and do you know why? For the same reason it says that God rested on the seventh day after He had created the heavens and the earth. He wasn't tired. He sat down because He had finished the job. I am sorry to have to report that I don't seem to finish anything; I always leave my desk covered with work to be done. But when Jesus went back to heaven He had finished everything that was necessary for your salvation and mine. Everything.

God in our day is satisfied with what Jesus did for you. Are you satisfied? "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied." Oh, the restlessness today! How busy people are! My friend, rest in Him. He paid a tremendous price for you.

How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? Do you have the answer to that? Are you going to try to escape by neglecting that salvation? My friend, I do not know who is the

worst sinner in your town, but if you are rejecting God's salvation for you, you are as guilty as the worst sinner in your town.

God has a remedy for every sin, except the sin of rejecting the Remedy. The Remedy is His Son.