

The Cross and Its Power

By Horatius Bonar

Isaiah 44:22; Zechariah 13:1; Matthew 10:38; I Corinthians 1:23-30; Daniel 9:24; Galatians 5:24

BEFORE I can live a Christian life, I must be a Christian. Am I such? I ought to know this. Do I know it, and in knowing it, know whose I am and whom I serve? Or is my title to the name still questionable, still a matter of anxious debate and search?

If I am to live as a son of God, I must be a son, and I must know it. Otherwise my life will be an artificial imitation, a piece of barren mechanism, performing certain excellent movements, but destitute of vital heat and force. Here many fail. They try to live like sons in order to make themselves sons, forgetting God's simple plan for attaining sonship at once, "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12).

The faith of many among us is, after all, but an attempt to believe; their repentance but an attempt to repent; and, in so doing, they only use words which they have learned from others. It is not the love of holiness that actuates them, but (at best) the love of the love of holiness. It is not the love of God that fills them, but the love of the love of God.

God's description of a Christian man is clear and well-defined. It has about it so little of the vague and wide that one wonders how any mistake should have arisen on this point, and so many dubious, so many false claims put in.

A Christian is one who "has tasted that the Lord is gracious" (1 Pet 2:3); who has been "begotten again unto a lively hope" (1 Pet 1:3); who has been "quickened together with Christ" (Eph 2:5); made a partaker of Christ (Heb 3:14); a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4); who "has been delivered from this present evil world" (Gal 1:4).

Such is God's description of one who has found his way to the cross, and is warranted in taking to himself the Antiochian name of "Christian," or the apostolic name of "saint." Of good about himself, previous to his receiving the record of the free forgiveness, he cannot speak. He remembers nothing loveable that could have recommended him to God; nothing fit that could have qualified him for the divine favor, save that he needed life. All that he can say for himself is that he "has known and believed the love that God hath to us" (1 John 4:16); and, in believing, has found that which makes him not merely a *happy*, but a *holy* man. He has discovered the fountainhead of a holy life.

Have I then found my way to the cross? If so, I am safe. I have the everlasting life. The first true touch of that cross has secured for me the eternal blessing. I am in the hands of Christ, and none shall pluck me out (John 10:28).

The cross makes us whole; not all at once indeed, but it does the work effectually. Before we reached it we were not "whole," but broken and scattered, nay, without a center toward which to gravitate. The cross forms that center and, in doing so, it draws together the disordered fragments of our being; it "unites our heart" (Psa 86:11), producing a wholeness or unity which no object of less powerful attractiveness could accomplish. It is a wholeness or unity which, beginning with the individual, reproduces itself on a larger scale, but with the same center of gravitation, in the church of God.

Of spiritual health, the cross is the source. From it there goes forth the "virtue" (*dunamis*, the power, Luke 6:19) that heals all maladies, be they slight or deadly. For "by His stripes we are healed" (Isa 53:5); and in Him we find "the tree of life," with its healing leaves (Rev 22:2). Golgotha has become Gilead, with its skillful Physician and its "bruised" balm (Jer 8:22; Isa 53:5). Old Latimer says well regarding the woman whom Christ cured, "She believed that Christ was such a healthful man that she should be sound as soon as she might touch Him." The "whole head [was] sick, and the whole heart faint" (Isa 1:5); but now the sickness is gone, and the vigor comes again to the fainting heart. The look, or rather the Object looked at, has done its work (Isa 45:22); the serpent of brass has accomplished that which no earthly medicines could effect. Not to us can it now be said, "Thou hast no healing medicines" (Jer 30:13), for the word of the great Healer is, "I will bring health and cure; yea, I will cure them, and will reveal unto them the abundance of

peace and truth” (Jer 33:6). Thus it is by the abundance of that peace and truth, revealed to us in the cross, that our cure is wrought.

The cure is not perfected in an hour. But, as the sight of the cross begins it, so does it complete it at last. The pulses of new health now beat in all our veins. Our whole being recognizes the potency of the divine medicine, and our diseases yield to it.

Yes, the cross heals. It possesses the double virtue of killing sin and quickening holiness. It makes all the fruits of the flesh to wither, while it cherishes and ripens the fruit of the Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal 5:22). By this the hurt of the soul is not “healed slightly,” but truly and thoroughly. It acts like the fresh balm of southern air to one whose constitution the frost and damp of the far north had undermined. It gives new tone and energy to our faculties, a new bent and aim to all our purposes, and a new elevation to all our hopes and longings. It gives the death-blow to self, it mortifies our members which are upon the earth. It crucifies the flesh with its affections and lusts. Thus, looking continually to the cross, each day, as at the first, we are made sensible of the restoration of our soul's health; evil loosens its hold, while good strengthens and ripens.

It is not merely that we “glory in the cross” (Gal 6:14), but we draw strength from it. It is the place of weakness, for there Christ “was crucified through weakness” (2 Cor 13:4); but it is, notwithstanding, the fountainhead of power to us. For as out of death came forth life, so out of weakness came forth strength. This is strength, not for one thing, but for everything. It is strength for activity or for endurance, for holiness as well as for work. He that would be holy or useful must keep near the cross. The cross is the secret of power, and the pledge of victory. With it we fight and overcome. No weapon can prosper against it, nor enemy prevail. With it we meet the fightings without as well as the fears within. With it we war the good warfare, we wrestle with principalities and powers, we “withstand” and we “stand” (Eph 6:11-13); we fight the good fight, we finish the course, we keep the faith (2 Tim 4:7).

Standing by the cross, we become imitators of the crucified One. We seek to be like Him, men who please not themselves (Rom 15:3); who do the Father's will, counting not our life dear to us who love our neighbors as ourselves, and the brethren as He loved us; who pray for our enemies; who revile not again when reviled; who threaten not when we suffer, but commit ourselves to Him that judgeth righteously; who live not to ourselves, and who die not to ourselves; who are willing to be of “no reputation,” but to “suffer shame for His name,” to take the place and name of “servant,” nay, to count “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb 11:26). “Forasmuch, then, as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same mind; for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin” (has “died to sin,” as in Romans 6:10), “that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God” (1 Pet 4:1,2).

Standing by the cross, we realize the meaning of such a text as this: “Our old man is [was] crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom 6:6); where the crucifixion of our old man, the destruction of the body of sin, and deliverance from the bondage of sin, are strikingly linked to one another, and linked, all of them, to the cross of Christ. Or we read the meaning of another: “I am [have been] crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Here the one Paul (not two Pauls, or two persons), speaks throughout, as completely identified with Christ and His cross. It is not one part of Paul in this clause and another in that; it is the one whole Paul throughout, who is crucified, dies, lives!

Like Isaac, he has been “received from the dead in a figure”; and as Abraham would, after the strange Moriah transaction, look on Isaac as given back from the dead, so would Jehovah reckon and treat this Paul as a risen man! Isaac would be the same Isaac, and yet not the same; so Paul is the same Paul, and yet not the same! He has passed through something which alters his state legally, and his character morally; he is new. Instead of the first Adam, who was of the earth earthy, he has got the last Adam, who is the Lord from heaven, for his guest: “Christ liveth in him”; “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (just as he says, “yet not I, but the grace of God in me”); and so he lives the rest of his life on earth, holding fast his connection with the crucified Son of God and His love. Or again, we gather light upon that text: “They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal 5:24); and that: “God forbid that I should glory,

save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal 6:14).

Standing by the cross, we realize the death of the Surety, and discover more truly the meaning of passages such as these: “Ye are dead [ye died], and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col 3:3); “Ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world” (Col 2:20); His death (and yours with Him) dissolved your connection with these; “If one died for all, then were all dead [all died]; and he died for all, that they who live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him who died for them, and rose again” (2 Cor 5:14); “To this end Christ both died and rose, and revived, that He might be Lord both of the dead and living” (Rom 14:9).

Romans 6:7-12, “He that is dead [has died] is freed [justified] from sin [i.e., He has paid the penalty]; now, if we be dead with Christ [or since we died with Christ], we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ being [having been] raised from the dead dieth no more [He has no second penalty to pay, no second death to undergo, Hebrews 9:27,28], death hath no more dominion over Him; for in that He died, He died unto sin once [His death finished His sin-bearing work once for all]; but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God; likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God, through Jesus Christ our Lord; let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body [even in your body, Romans 12:1], that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.”

There is something peculiarly solemn about these passages. They are very unlike, both in tone and words, the light speech which some indulge in, when speaking of the gospel and its forgiveness. Ah, this is the language of one who has in him the profound consciousness that severance from sin is one of the mightiest, as well as most blessed, things in the universe. He has learned how deliverance from condemnation may be found, and all legal claims against him met. But, more than this, he has learned how the grasp of sin can be unclasped, how its serpent-folds can be unwound, how its impurities can be erased, how he can defy its wiles and defeat its strength—*how he can be holy!* This is, to him, of discoveries one of the greatest and most gladdening. Forgiveness itself is precious, chiefly as a step to holiness. How any one, after reading statements such as those of the apostle, can speak of sin, or pardon, or holiness without awe, seems difficult to understand. Or how any one can feel, that the forgiveness which the believing man finds at the cross of Christ is a release from the obligation to live a holy life, is no less incomprehensible.

It is true that sin remains in the saint; and it is equally true that this sin does not bring condemnation back to him. But there is a way of stating this which would almost lead to the inference that watchfulness has thus been rendered less necessary; that holiness is not now so great an urgency; that sin is not so terrible as formerly. To tell a sinning saint that no amount of sin can alter the perfect standing before God, into which the blood of Christ brings us, may not be technically or theologically incorrect; but this mode of putting the truth is not that of the epistle to the Romans or Ephesians; it sounds almost like, “Continue in sin because grace abounds”; and it is not Scriptural language. The apostolic way of putting the point is that of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1).

Thus, then, that which cancels the curse provides the purity. The cross not only pardons, but it purifies. From it there gushes out the double fountain of peace and holiness. It heals, unites, strengthens, quickens, blesses. It is God’s wing under which we are gathered, and “he that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (Psa 91:1).

But we have our cross to bear, and our whole life is to be a bearing of it. It is not Christ’s cross that we are to carry; that is too heavy for us, and besides, it has been done once for all. But our cross remains, and much of a Christian life consists in a true, honest, decided bearing of it. Not indeed to be nailed to it, but to take it up and carry it—that is our calling. To each of us a cross is presented when we assume the name of Christ. Strange will it be if we refuse to bear it; counting it too heavy or too sharp, too much associated with reproach and hardship. The Lord’s words are very uncompromising, “If any man will come after me, let him deny *himself*, and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). Our refusal to do this may contribute not a little to our ease and reputation here; but it will not add to the weight of glory which the resurrection of the just shall bring to those who have confessed the Master, and borne His shame, and done His work in an evil world.

With the “taking up of the cross *daily*” (Luke 9:23), our Lord connects the denial of self and the following of Him. He “pleased not Himself”; neither must we, for the servant is not above his master. He did not His own will; neither must we, for the disciple is not above his Lord. If we endure no hardness, but are self-indulgent, self-sparing men, how shall we be followers of Him? If we grudge labor, or sacrifice, or time, or money, or our good name, are we remembering His example? If we shrink from the weight of the cross, or its sharpness, or the roughness of the way along which we have to carry it, are we keeping His word in mind, “Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with” (Matt 20:23)?

The cross on which we are crucified with Christ, and the cross which we carry are different things, yet they both point in one direction, and lead us along one way. They both protest against sin, and summon to holiness. They both “condemn the world,” and demand separation from it. They set us upon ground so high and so unearthly, that the questions which some raise as to the expediency of conformity to the world's ways are answered as soon as they are put, and the sophistries of the flesh, pleading in behalf of gaiety and revelry, never for a moment perplex us. The kingdom is in view, the way is plain, the cross is on our shoulders; and shall we turn aside after fashions, frivolities, pleasures, and unreal beauties, even were they all as harmless as men say they are?

It may seem a small thing now to be a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God, but it will be found a fearful thing hereafter, when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all His holy angels with Him. It may seem a possible thing just now, by avoiding all extremes and all thoroughness, either in religion or in worldliness, to conjoin both of these, but in the day of the separation of the real from the unreal, it will be discovered to have been a poor attempt to accomplish an impossibility; a failure—a failure for eternity, a failure as complete as it is disastrous and remediless. Egypt and Canaan cannot coalesce; Babylon and Jerusalem can never be one. These are awful words, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness,” and surely the Holy Spirit meant what He said, when He enjoined, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world; if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (I John 2:15).

The cross, then, makes us decided men. It brings both our hearts and our wills to the side of God. It makes us feel the cowardice, as well as guilt, of indecision, bidding us be bold and stable, “holding faith and a good conscience”; all the more because the wide “liberality” of modern free-thinking has confounded skepticism with candor, and recognizes in religious indifference a virtue and a grace. Not to take any side strongly is no evidence of a large soul or a great purpose. It is generally an indication of littleness.

The furrows drawn by a firm hand are strongly and deeply drawn. It is no surface work; soil and subsoil are turned over with a decision which implies that, if the work is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well. The man of true purpose and strong mind handles his plough resolutely, from end to end of the longest furrow, till the whole field be wrought. Thus do men of true will and aim proceed, both in belief and action. Having put their hand to the plough, they do not so much as look back.

The thoughts and purposes of men bear the impress of the mind from which they emerge, as much in their decision, as in their general character. As earth's streams are decided in their flow, and owe the measure of their decision to the elevation of the mountain-range down whose steep slopes they pour, so is it with the opinions and actions of men. Decision is no proof of weakness; it is not bigotry, nor intolerance, nor ignorance, though it has sometimes been the emanation of these, and identified with them.

Every thing in the Bible is decided; its statements of fact, its revelations of truth, its condemnation of error, its declarations respecting God and man, respecting our present and our future. Its characters are decided men—Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Paul. It speaks always with authority, as expecting to be implicitly credited. It reckons on our receiving its teaching, not doubtfully but certainly; and it leaves us only the alternative of denying its whole authenticity, or of accepting its revelations, without a qualification and without a subterfuge. To excuse ourselves for doubt and indecision, and oscillation of faith, by pointing to differences of creed, is to suggest either that Scripture is not infallible, or that it is not intelligible.

The Bible is God's direct revelation to each man into whose hands it comes; and, for the reception of all that it contains, each man is responsible, though all his fellows should reject it. The Judgment Day will decide who is right; meanwhile it is to God and not to man that we are to listen. For the understanding of

God's revelation, each one is accountable. If it can be proved that the Bible is so uncertainly written as to render diversity of thought a necessity, or so obscurely expressed as to keep men in ignorance, then, when the day of reckoning comes, the misled man will have opportunity of substantiating his charges against God, and claiming deduction from his penalty, on the plea of the ambiguity of the statute. Meanwhile we are responsible for decision—decision, in thought and action, on every point which the Holy Spirit has written; and it is not likely that the Spirit of wisdom and love, in writing a Book for us, would write so darkly as to be unintelligible, or should give such an uncertain sound that no man could be sure as to which, out of a score of meanings suggested by man, was the genuine.

Man's usual thought is that the want of explicitness in the Bible is the cause of diversity of opinion, and that a little more fullness of statement and clearness of language would have prevented all sects and confusions. The answer to this is twofold: (1) That greater fullness would have only opened new points of divergence and variance, so that, instead of a hundred opinions, we should, in that case, have a thousand; (2) That the real cause of all the divergence and unsettlement is to be found in man's moral state; that there is not a veil upon the Bible, but scales on human eyes; and that, were that spiritual imperfection entirely removed, the difficulty would be, not how to believe, but how not to believe; and the wonder would be how it was possible for us to attach more than one meaning to words so significant and simple.