



“Paradoxes of Calvary”

Kevin Presley

It is impossible to consider the cross of our Lord without being overwhelmed with a mixture of emotions. On one hand, it is the saddest, most pitiful scene mortal eyes will ever behold: the good, kind and innocent Jesus, beaten, stripped, bloodied and mangled, hanging shamefully on a crudely fashioned cross. It was truly the most horrible and heinous method ever devised to execute a human being. There were many who suffered the cruel fate of crucifixion during the days of the Romans until it was finally outlawed by Constantine in the fourth century because it was so awful and inhumane.

Jesus' case was very typical of Roman crucifixions. After suffering the torture of a scourging--which itself often left men dead--Jesus was weak. His back had been laid open by the cat of nine tails that Roman soldiers had used upon Him. He is led in a procession of shame and humiliation to the face of Calvary's summit. Jesus would have been thrown backward onto the crudely hewn crossbeam. The soldier quickly feels for the depression in the front of His wrist and then takes a heavy iron spike several inches in length and with a mallet drives it through the quivering flesh into the cross beneath. Experts say the nail probably struck the median nerve as it passed through the Lord's wrist, causing unbelievable shocks of pain up His arms and into His neck.

The crossbeam with Jesus' body hanging from it was then lifted up and secured to the pole already in place in the ground. One of Jesus' feet was then taken and pressed onto the other with the toes pointing downward, and another large wrought-iron spike was driven through the arch of each foot, leaving His knees slightly bent. Jesus at this point was crucified. The word *excruciate* is of Latin origin and it bears the meaning *as on the cross*. So, it was incredible torture that Christ endured every minute He was on the cross.

What a terrible scene we encounter at Calvary. How could Paul, living in a time when everyone understood the shame associated with crucifixion, say in **Galatians 6:14** that he *gloried in the cross*. Jesus himself said in **John 12:32**, “...If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me.” In other words, there would be a magnetic force to the cross that would draw men unto it. How strange to

think we would find such an appeal in such a dark hour in the history of the world! But thus, it is. For Paul said the following:

I Corinthians 1:18 “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

To us, it is an ensign of faith and victory. In something so horrible and so dark, we see something so wonderful and so bright.

A *paradox* is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true. The Bible is full of paradoxical statements and teachings. For example, Jesus said in **Mark 8:35**, “**For whosoever will save his life shall lose it...**” That’s a paradox that expresses one of the fundamental principles of the scriptures. The scriptures also teach us that loving involves hating, that being first requires being last, or as we recently learned on this broadcast, that maturing in Christ means taking on the characteristics of a child. But nowhere are such paradoxes more plainly seen than surrounding the cross of Calvary. I want to notice three of them with you today.

First of all, in the cross, *justice* was shown but *mercy* was granted. I can’t think of two terms more antithetical than the words *justice* and *mercy*. In every criminal trial, someone is satisfied and someone is disappointed. Every crime carries with it a prescribed penalty according to the law. When a person is convicted of a crime, the judge has the prerogative to exact the full penalty for the offense. He can choose to make the convict pay the ultimate price the law allows—perhaps even the price of the offender’s life. When that happens, the victim or the victim’s family will walk away with as much closure as possible, satisfied to know that justice has been served. On the other hand, the judge can be merciful. He may take into account the record of the offender or the circumstances of that person’s life and choose to give a lesser sentence or let them go on probation. When that happens, someone is usually relieved, but others are sorely disappointed. So, we don’t normally blend the words justice and mercy. Yet the two are perfectly mingled at Calvary.

Psalm 89:14 “Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face.”

Justice must be the foundation of God’s throne if His throne is to have any authority. After all, one of the immutable characteristics of God is holiness. He is perfect and set apart from all sin and impurity.

Habakkuk 1:13 “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity:”

Now, that put God in somewhat of a dilemma. When God created man, He gave him a code of conduct by which to live. Like any law that has any force behind it, a penalty was threatened for disobedience. Imagine a country trying to enforce a law without prisons, or a parent trying to command respect from a child he never has disciplined. God had to attach a penalty to the transgression of His own law. He said, *the day you eat of the forbidden tree, you will die* (**Genesis 3:3**). Adam disobeyed the Lord’s command and left God to mete out justice.

The penalty had to be exacted or God’s law would be a mockery and His holiness would be violated. God is limited by the constraints of His own nature and thus, He had no choice but to punish sin. God would have been well within His rights to drive Adam from the garden and abandon the human race forever. He could have said, “That’s it! I gave you one simple law to keep and you didn’t do it. So, it’s good

enough for you to just die and be destroyed.” But God couldn’t bring Himself to do that. That’s because of other immutable traits of God: love and kindness.

I John 4:8 “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.”

God, by His own nature, desires to give of Himself in whatever way necessary to make His creation happy, but His mercy could not be independent of His demand for justice. I want you to understand this today: letting man off the hook without the penalty for sin being paid was not an option. So, how could those two opposite attributes possibly come together? John explains it to us in the next verse.

I John 4:9 “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.”

In other words, the penalty could be paid *vicariously*, or *through another*. The law of God demanded a sacrifice, but the mercy of God provided the sacrifice. The law of God demanded that someone die for what man had done, but the mercy of God provided the vicarious victim.

Isaiah 53:4- 5,10 “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 of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed...Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”

II Corinthians 5:21 “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

I Peter 2:24 “Who his own self bare 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.”

When Christ hung upon the cross, He suffered everything we deserve. For example, we will never suffer our own separation because Christ was separated from God as He bore our sins on the cross. The person who rejects the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, though, will be eternally cast from God’s presence. He’ll suffer the fate of his own sin. We will never suffer our own shame because Christ was put to shame for the sake of our sins. They stripped Him of His garments and hung Him as a naked spectacle for the wicked world to gaze upon. He allowed our sin to put him to an open shame. However, the sinner will die in shame -- no righteousness to clothe himself with in the Day of Judgment.

We will never suffer the agony of thirst. Victims of crucifixion quickly dehydrated and sometimes died of thirst. Jesus cried out in thirst but refused what was given Him to drink. But the person who rejects Jesus will beg alongside the rich man for one drop of water. We will never suffer the agony of eternal pain. Put yourself in the place of Jesus. Spread out your arms and feel the nails go thru your hands and then your feet. Feel the excruciating pain as the cross is lifted into the air and dropped into its place. With every muscle strained, and the tendons and flesh torn, feel the awful thirst, the trickle of blood running down the crown of thorns into the mouth and nose. Feel the heat of the sun as it bakes your body. That’s the picture of the sinner in hell--not for six hours, but forever.

Every sinner needs to know that sin exacts a penalty. Mercy is not God ignoring sin, but making a provision for it. Every time you sin, you either put that sin on the back of Jesus, or you accumulate the wrath of God to be poured out on your soul in the last day. Thank God that through the cross, justice and mercy were mingled together.

But the second contradiction or paradox of the cross involves the opposite words *victory* and *defeat*. Both sides experienced both in the same event. In fact, you might say victory was won through defeat. To understand that, we need to go all the way back to what we sometimes call the “primal prophecy” or first recorded prophecy pointing forward to Christ, recorded in the book of **Genesis**.

Genesis 3:14-15 “And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

So, when God cursed the serpent along with the man and woman, He said that in the process of Satan trying to defeat the seed of the woman (which refers to Christ), Jesus would, in turn, deal a final and devastating blow to the devil. Well, that’s exactly what occurred when Jesus was crucified. What appeared to be Satan’s victory became his final fall, and what appeared to be Christ’s fall, became His victory.

Sinful men unwittingly crucified Jesus to the delight of Satan and the demons of hell. Satan must have laughed with fiendish joy as he watched the Son of God die on the cross. At the same time, the angels of heaven must have cried as they leaned over the balconies of heaven and watched their King suffer so, because neither the devil nor the angels, or anyone else for that matter, knew what was taking place when Jesus died. God had kept it a secret or a mystery until it all unfolded. What really took place on Calvary was a secret known only to God and His Son that day.

I Corinthians 2:7-8 “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

There must have been suspenseful silence in heaven as Jesus was crucified. Perhaps the angels wept as they saw the One they had adored through the ages hanging on the cross in the throes of death. They must have wondered if Hell had won and God had lost. But though Satan bruised the Savior’s heel, with one crushing blow, Jesus destroyed the head of the serpent. After six hours of gloom and horror, Jesus said three words that split time in two and changed the world forever: “*It is finished.*” The scene was changed. The clouds that hung over the land broke apart and the earth itself began to testify to the fact that something tremendous had just taken place. The veil in the temple was rent and the most sacred place on earth was now exposed and open for all. That was a picture that in His own suffering and defeat, Jesus really won the victory by opening the gate of heaven for all who would enter.

Also, remember, the body of Jesus was dead and buried--but it didn’t remain in the grave. He broke the surly bonds of death and arose triumphant. He defeated Satan once and for all. No wonder the scripture says, *Had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

Finally, we see in the cross another paradox: The *power* of God was shown through *weakness*. Though it appeared as though Christ was vulnerable and weak, the cross of Christ was no failure. Christ the King was nailed to the cross in abject shame and rejection, but ultimately He displayed God's power by submitting to the weakness of the cross.

II Corinthians 13:4 "For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you."

I Corinthians 1:18 "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God."

The world sees the cross as a symbol of weakness on the part of God, but it is actually the Christian's ensign of victory. The cross has power like no other force or influence on earth. It has the power to cause lives to be reborn and find new hope and direction. It has the power to forgive sins and erase the guilty conscience. It has the power to create within us the heart of a humble servant. And it has such power that it has fixated the world for 2,000 years. It's just as Jesus said, "*If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me.*" No other religion has the power of Christianity, because no other religion is built around a cross. That sounds like a paradox itself, but it's the great power of the gospel message that no other message possesses.

What do you see in the cross of Christ? Do you merely see a sad story of a lonely man who died a cruel and undeserved death? Do you see nothing more than a fact of history, or do you see God's love for you and His passionate desire to save you from sin? Do you see it as your only hope of escape from the condemnation of sin? Would you not put your faith and trust in what happened on the cross of Christ to those many centuries ago? Allow Jesus to pay your debt so that you won't incur the unlimited wrath of God in the day that is to come. Would you not be united with Christ in baptism today and allow the benefits of His death, His cleansing and soul-saving blood to flow over your soul and wash it clean?

Acts 22:16 "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

I hope you'll do that today.

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