

The cross of Christ in biblical perspective

Few issues have been as distorted and misinterpreted as the cross of Calvary. For the Jews contemporary with Jesus it was *skándalon*, «a stumbling block» (1 Cor. 1:23 NKJV); for the Greeks, imbued with philosophical ideas, *morías*, «foolishness» (1 Cor. 1:23 NKJV). It seemed complete absurdity to think that the salvation of humanity would depend on the death of someone crucified, with all the repulsiveness such a form of execution implies.

When the so-called Holy Week (Easter season) arrives, every year the religious manifestations seen in many places show the limited knowledge that a large number of people still have of the meaning of the cross. It grieves me to see how the most pathetic scenes of the passion and death of the Savior are reproduced theatrically in impressive processions. In the least deplorable case, the images move the feelings of some viewers; but in general everything is reduced to mere spectacle. As part of this, one usually sees some penitent who participates in the procession carrying a large wooden cross. The man believes that with that sacrifice he contributes to the atonement of his sins, thereby evidencing his ignorance of one of the fundamental truths of the Gospel: only «the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin» (1 John 1:7 NKJV).

Not only during the Holy Week, but throughout the whole year, many people wear a necklace with a small golden cross. It is difficult to know if this is due to an intimate religious feeling, to the tendency to exhibit ornaments or to superstition (usually a protective talisman is seen in that object). This last interpretation would be in line with the secular practice of crossing oneself. It is thought that making the sign of the cross drives away all kinds of evils, physical and moral. Thus, deep down, the cross is related to magic.

The wide dissemination of these and other errors makes a correct exposition of the theme of the cross necessary. Its breadth forces us to present it very briefly, almost in the form of an outline only.

I. The crucifixion of Christ as a historical fact

When the Apostles' Creed states that Jesus Christ “suffered under the power of Pontius Pilate” it is highlighting a historical event, which is highly significant. Christianity does not rest on ideas; it is not mere theology. It is based on historically provable events related to the life and work of Christ: His birth, His ministry, His death, His resurrection. The authors of the four gospels explain it all to us in their literary compositions. Such compositions are not simply the result of the authors' zeal, as some critics have thought. It is undeniable that the gospels were written with hearts inflamed by the remembrance of Christ, inspired by the action of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that they did it with the objectivity of eyewitnesses (Matthew, Mark and John) or with the spirit of a serious investigator (Luke, Luke 1:1-3).

Their narratives present the facts with great realism, particularly those related to the passion and death of Jesus. The trial, the judgment and the execution were carried out

in accordance with the legal dispositions of Rome that we know from historians. Although Jesus was handed over to the Roman governor by the Jewish authorities, it was Pilate who had the final word in the process. The determining factor in his resolution was the Sanhedrin's insistence that Jesus was a threat to the political stability of the country: «He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place» (Luke 23:5 NKJV). This malicious distortion could suggest that perhaps Jesus was one of the leaders of the subversive group of the Zealots (one of the apostles had militated in their ranks -Matt. 10:4- and probably Judas Iscariot as well). He had also implied that He was the Messiah, the King of the Jews, and had recommended evasion of tax that was destined for the empire's estate. Given these insinuations, despite his doubts and hesitation, Pilate finally «delivered Him to them to be crucified» (John 19:16 NKJV). All the details fit perfectly with the historical framework of that time. There should therefore be no doubt as to the truthfulness of the gospel writers. The only difficulty about what they said is not related to their historicity. It would be -and is- the interpretation of the historical fact. What does the death of Christ mean?

II. The cross, the goal of Jesus' life

We do not have data that allow us to deduce when Jesus began to be aware of His divine identity and His mission in the world, although it had to be at a very young age, since at the age of twelve He declared His need to be occupied in His Father's business (Luke 2:41-49). We do know that early in His public ministry He saw clearly the bloody end of His life (Matt. 16:21). The prediction of His death is repeated, openly or veiledly, on several occasions (Mark 10:38; Matt. 20:18; Luke 12:50). As the outcome of the battle with unbelieving Jews approaches, Jesus speaks of His «hour» (John 16:32 NKJV), and shortly before His arrest in Gethsemane, He declares: «The hour has come» (John 17:1 NKJV), words that He confirms after His agony in the garden, when His captors are about to apprehend Him (Matt. 26:45; Mark 14:41). It would be said that, more than any other man, Jesus was born to die. His entire life ran under the ominous shadow of the cross.

Many people reach the age of maturity and still do not grasp the meaning of their existence. And they are all unaware what their future will be. The Lord Jesus Christ had a very clear idea of His identity and His work. He had not come to earth primarily to teach or to heal the sick; nor to impress the world with His miracles. He was born to «die». Everything else in His life was secondary. In His case death was not the end; it was the culmination of His life. On the cross God's work for the salvation of men was to be accomplished. On what happened in Golgotha would depend the repair of the ruins caused by sin and the rehabilitation of the human being, rebellious in his fallen nature, for the reconciliation with God and participation in the glory of His Kingdom.

III. The meaning of the death of Christ

The Lord Jesus himself was very aware that His death would not be a bitter failure, an irreparable tragedy that would extinguish the traces of His passage through history. Always, behind the cross, He saw His resurrection (Matt. 16:21), the triumph of an indestructible life. For Him the cross was the culmination of what was revealed in the

Scriptures about the Messiah (Luke 24:45-47). He knew that He was the Antitype of numerous types contained in the Old Testament: temple, feasts, sacrifices, priests, kings. Above all, He saw himself as Ebed Yahweh, the suffering Servant described in Isaiah 52 and 53 who was to «make His soul an offering for sin» (Isa. 53:10 NKJV). Jesus probably remembered this text when He declared that He had not come to be served, but «to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many» (Matt. 20:28 NKJV).

The apostles also understood and proclaimed the meaning of the cross. Their testimony is unanimous in highlighting the vicarious, atoning and redeeming character of Christ's death (Rom. 4:25; Rom. 5:8; Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 11:24; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; Gal. 1:4; Gal. 2:21; Eph. 5:2; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5). Christ was the second Adam, who put an end to the transgression and condemnation reported by the first Adam to bring to men the justification of life (Rom. 5:17). This fact leads us to consider some important aspects of the message of the cross:

The universality of God's saving purpose. Throughout the entire Bible the universalist character of the divine plan is noted. At the dawn of the patriarchal period, God says to Abraham: «In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed» (Gen. 12:3). That promise is confirmed in the New Testament. Jesus confessed that He had other sheep outside the Jewish flock, which He would attract to hear His voice and integrate into His fold (John 10:16). Before some Greeks who wanted to see Him, He makes, in clear allusion to His death, a significant revelation: «If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all peoples to Myself. This He said, signifying by what death He would die» (John 12:32-33). One of His last statements was: «Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations» (Luke 24:46-47). Paul ratifies the universality of the Gospel (Gal. 3:28). And John, in his apocalyptic visions, sees, in the company of Christ, «He who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood» (Rev. 1:5) «a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands» (Rev. 7:9).

Parallel to the universalist conception of redemption, Paul discovers the **cosmic dimension** of the reconciling work of Christ in his death (Col. 1:19-20). God's eternal purpose was that «in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ» (Eph. 1:9-10) within the framework of a new creation. Only in this way could the effects of what happened at Calvary be fully seen.

IV. The cross in the believer's experience

The death of Jesus is not just a historical fact. It has a profound projection in the Christian's experience. Paul wrote to the Galatians: «I have been crucified with Christ» (Gal. 2:20 NKJV). In saying this, he thinks fundamentally of his justification before God, as follows from Galatians 2:21. Christ on the cross died to atone for sin. If I am identified with Him in His death, I am free from condemnation. By virtue of that atonement, God grants me His «justice».

But there is more. In another text, Paul states that «we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the

Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life... our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin» (Rom. 6:4-6 NKJV). Here we have the secret of sanctification. It is by identification with the death and resurrection of Christ that we can live holy lives.

Communion of sufferings together with Christ. When Jesus announced His death to His disciples He warned them about the destiny that awaited them. They were to be willing to take their cross and follow Him, even to lose their lives because of Him (Matt. 16:24-25). To James and John he said: «You will indeed drink the cup that I drink» (Mark 10:39 NKJV). Servants and disciples could not expect better luck than their Master and Lord. If we are «joint heirs with Christ», it is logical that «we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together» (Rom. 8:17 NKJV). But «the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us» (Rom. 8:18 NKJV).

Deliverance from the fear of death. Christ identified himself with men in their human nature, in suffering and in death; He shared in their «flesh and blood» so that, «through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage» (Heb. 2:14-15 NKJV). In this reality Christian hope is founded.

The apostle Paul always nourished himself spiritually from the message of the cross. He was ecstatic before his greatness and lived it in very rich experience. No wonder he exclaimed: «God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world» (Gal. 6:14). Can we affirm the same? Only then can we celebrate Holy Week with dignity.

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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