

WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS

Tanner Smith

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.— Galatian 6:14

This hymn, published in 1707 and written by Isaac Watts, is one that will, should we allow it, take our attention and our hearts out of the self-absorbed existence in which we often linger, and place us in a renewed state of awe and wonder at the cross of Christ Jesus our Lord.

At first glance, we think of this hymn as a reflection on the sacrifice of our Savior: one that inspires thanksgiving and gratitude for the remission of our sins and the clearing of our guilt. It does that indeed, however, there is more to this historic anthem. It also functions as a call to completely re-imagine the Gospel and how it affects the core of who we are and how we live.

Taken from Galatians 6:14, this beautiful collection of lyrics reflects the heart of the Apostle Paul who, through his own Gospel experiences, perhaps began to understand the weight of what it means to be crucified to the world and to be identified with Christ's death and resurrection.

As we read the words of this hymn and listen to the melody of this song, let's exercise the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see and ears to hear the eternal implications of the cross. Not just for the remission of sins, as wondrous and powerful as that is, but also as the Savior's example and instruction for a life of **humility**, **sacrifice**, and **surrender**.

VERSE ONE: (HUMILITY)

*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.*

In this verse we take time to survey, to study, and to take in the work of the cross on which Jesus died. Phil 2:5-8 ⁵ *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,*^[a] ⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,*^[b] ⁷ *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,*^[c] *being born in the likeness of men.* ⁸ *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

The humility of Jesus, the glorified Son of God, to condescend to become a man and take on the sin of all of humanity while crying out “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” is astonishing in and of itself. Therefore, it should create in us wonder at His grace and a desire for that type of humble service to be lived out in our own lives. This is the humility of Jesus at work in and through us.

Begin to ask God how “this mind could be in you which was also Christ Jesus.” Reflect on His humility and humble yourself under the mighty hand of God.

VERSE TWO: (SACRIFICE)

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

In this verse, we wake to the truth that there is no cause for boasting outside of His death. No accomplishment, goal, or achievement could possibly amount to that which Christ has done for us. It is thus by grace alone that we are called to serve Him. There can be, in the mind of the believer, no thought of “re-paying Jesus for the work of the cross,” and thus our only option, in the face of His mercy, is to be willing to sacrifice everything in our lives on the altar of thanksgiving.

Sacrifice is a bit of a foreign concept to us. Even if we do occasionally practice this discipline, we often do so with some temporary reward in mind. We will sacrifice sleep for a job, we will sacrifice sweets for a diet, and we may even sacrifice time with our families for something we love to do. However, the sacrifice of Christ is one that, though it merits a reward, reaps in eternal benefits that which is sowed in the mortal present.

If we are to be a people of the cross, we must be a people who learn to sacrifice even some good things in this life simply to know the fellowship of Jesus’ suffering and the power of His eternal victory. (Phil 3:8-11)

⁸ 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 ⁹ 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 — ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Begin to ask the Lord what he would call you to sacrifice in your own life, simply for the sake of knowing Him more.

VERSE THREE: (PICTURE JESUS)

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

Let's use this verse as a sort of refrain or rest. Visualize the blood flowing from Jesus' head, hands, and feet and let it speak to you of His love for you, His love for the world, and His plan to redeem all of mankind. His crucifixion and resurrection are now, to us, an invitation into this work of seeing all come into relationship with our Savior.

Oh, how Jesus loves humanity. That He, the King of all creation, would give himself for us.

Our life's calling is intimacy with this sacrificial Savior. Our life's responsibility is to participate in His loving, redemptive work.

Life is both a beautiful gift and a massive responsibility in the light of His love, and His blood shed for us.

VERSE FOUR: (SURRENDER)

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

The hymn concludes with a call to participate in Jesus' act of surrender to the Father's will. Just as He chose to say, "Not my will, but Yours be done (Luke 22:42)", we now say to Jesus, "not my will, my plans, my vision of a 'happy life'", but your Kingdom come, your will be done in my life as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10). If that means suffering, if that means pain, if that means tragedy, the surrendered life will result in victory when we see Him face to face. As well, every day till that glorious day can be spent in complete awe and wonder at the merciful, gracious, faithful, love Jesus has for us and demonstrated at the cross.

So, in light of the cross of Christ, we now bow in reverence. At the humility, the sacrifice, and the surrender of Jesus our example, we now say in response: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Ask the Lord how you can surrender all to Him today, anew and afresh.

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers,^[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Romans 12:1

LYRICS:

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