



GLORYING IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST



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Each of the Gospel writers bore witness that Jesus is the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh, setting forth what He taught, describing how He ministered, and providing detail concerning when and under what circumstances He performed miracles. More important, each Gospel moves rapidly through the Master's three-year ministry toward the climactic Passion Week—His Last Supper, the institution of the sacrament, the Intercessory Prayer, His sufferings and ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane, His Jewish and Roman trials, His Crucifixion and death on Calvary, and His glorious rise on the third day to resurrected immortality.

Paul and the Cross

As we make our way through the Gospels and then move through the next section—what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has suggested that we retitled “The Acts of the Resurrected Christ Working through the Holy Spirit in the Lives and Ministries of His Ordained Apostles”¹—we then proceed into what

is for me the most stimulating, perceptive, provocative, profound, and inspiring section of all biblical teachings, the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. These in fact contain treasure houses of doctrinal data, insight into such matters as the desperate plight of unregenerate man; a variety of approaches to understanding the Atonement (satisfaction, substitution, ransom); the transforming power of the blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in renewing and resuscitating the spiritually stillborn; the doctrine of justification by faith and salvation by grace; and the abundant life enjoyed by those who have become new creatures in Christ.

Paul tends to use certain key words to denote a greater, grander, broader concept. For example, the word *circumcision* comes to convey much more than the rite performed on eight-day-old male children, which was a token of the covenant given to Father Abraham. It comes to denote Jewishness, Judaism, and life under the law of Moses with the onerous expectations of obedience to the 613 commandments of the Torah. Similarly, the word *cross* in reference to the Crucifixion of Jesus comes to mean more than simply the mode of torture and execution invented by the Persians and perfected by the Romans. It was a token of the Atonement. To say that one believed in and taught the cross was to say that one accepted the reality of the lowly Nazarene's suffering and death as having divine redemptive power. But this was no easy sell, no message that tickled the ears of those to whom Paul bore witness. Indeed, it was scandalous.

For example, Paul reminds the Corinthian Saints that the risen Lord had sent him "to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. . . . For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek

after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:17–18, 22–23). Why so? Why would the Jews and the Greeks have been so put off by the idea of a crucified savior? One possible reason is that Moses had decreed that any person hanged on a tree is cursed by God (see Deuteronomy 21:23). What, then, do we make of the outlandish claim made by many Christians that God had cursed the one who claimed to be God? That is, God had cursed Himself! Ridiculous. Irony of ironies: the one who had come into the world as the Tree of Life, the Tree of Blessing, hung, bled, suffered, and died on the tree of cursing and death.

“From both the Greek and Roman points of view, the stigma of crucifixion made the whole notion of the gospel claiming Jesus as the Messiah an absolute absurdity,” John MacArthur has written:

A glance at the history of crucifixion in first-century Rome reveals what Paul’s contemporaries thought about it. It was a horrific form of capital punishment, originating, most likely, in the Persian Empire, but other barbarians used it as well. The condemned died an agonizingly slow death by suffocation, gradually becoming too exhausted and traumatized to pull himself up on the nails in his hands, or push himself up on the nail through his feet, enough to take a deep breath of air. King Darius crucified three thousand Babylonians. Alexander the Great crucified two thousand from the city of Tyre. Alexander Janius crucified eight hundred Pharisees, while they watched soldiers slaughter their wives and children at their feet.

This sealed the horror of the crucifixion in the Jewish mind. Romans came to power in Israel in 63 B.C. and used crucifixion extensively. Some writers say authorities crucified as many as thirty thousand people around that

time. Titus Vespasian crucified so many Jews in A.D. 70 that the soldiers had no room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies. It wasn't until 337, when Constantine abolished crucifixion, that it disappeared after a millennium of cruelty in the world.²

Martin Hengel pointed out that “to believe that . . . the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness. The real gods of Greece and Rome could be distinguished from mortal men by the very fact that they were *immortal*—they had absolutely nothing in common with the cross as a sign of shame . . . and thus of the one who . . . was ‘bound in the most ignominious fashion’ and ‘executed in a shameful way.’”³ Nevertheless, when Paul came to the Corinthians he “came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1–2).

Note Paul's use of the words *cross* and *crucify* in some of his epistles:

“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized [literally immersed, changed identity] into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?

“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

“For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death [that is, united with Him in a death like His], we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

“Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed [that is, rendered

powerless], that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Romans 6:3–6).”

“I am 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” (Galatians 2:20).

“For he is our peace, who hath made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; . . . and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross” (Ephesians 2:14–16).

“And [Christ] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven” (Colossians 1:18–20).

Finally, let me point out one of my favorite New Testament passages that is the inspiration for a verse in the beautiful hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” which I quote at the end of this chapter: “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

Clearly, the doctrine of the cross, meaning the doctrine of the Atonement, was right where it needed to be—at the heart and core of Paul’s teachings. Neither the scandal of the cross—a word that was not even acceptable in polite Roman company—nor the absurdity of a dying Messiah could hinder the Apostle from delivering his witness of the Christ to the Gentiles throughout the ends of the known world. He was not ashamed of the gospel, which included Christ’s sufferings and death on the cross (see Romans 1:16).

Historically we should note that in the first few Christian centuries the cross was not considered a virtuous or admirable symbol but rather a terrifying reminder of what Jesus and many thousands of others had ignominiously suffered. In fact, some scholars report that the cross did not appear in churches as a symbol of veneration until AD 431. Crosses on steeples did not appear until AD 586, and it was not until the sixth century that crucifixes were sanctioned by the Roman Church.

Restoration Scripture and the Cross

The Bible does not stand alone in testifying of the significance of the cross. Nephi foresaw the time, some six hundred years ahead of the Crucifixion, when Jesus would be “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Nephi 11:33). Much like Paul, Jacob called upon the followers of the Redeemer to experience for themselves the power of the cross: “Wherefore, we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ, and *view his death, and suffer his cross* and bear the shame of the world” (Jacob 1:8; emphasis added; see also Moroni 9:25). Notice the language of the risen Lord to the people of the Book of Mormon: “Behold I have given unto you my gospel, and this is the gospel which I have given unto you—that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me. And *my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross*; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil” (3 Nephi 27:13–14; emphasis added).

The testimony of the Doctrine and Covenants is that “Jesus was crucified by sinful men for the sins of the world, yea, for the remission of sins unto the contrite heart” (D&C 21:9). “I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for the sins of the world, even as many as will believe on my name, that they may become the [children] of God, even one in me as I am one in the Father, as the Father is one in me, that we may be one” (D&C 35:2). In beginning a brief passage on various spiritual gifts, a revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants affirms: “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (D&C 46:13–14). Elsewhere: “Behold, I, the Lord, who was crucified for the sins of the world, give unto you a commandment that you shall forsake the world” (D&C 53:2). President Joseph F. Smith was taught in his vision of the redemption of the dead that salvation has been “wrought through the sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross” (D&C 138:35).

I have not even begun to take the time to list or read the scores of passages in the Book of Mormon and modern scripture that speak of the vital need for Christ’s suffering *and* death. That is to say, it was not just His suffering but also His death on the cruel cross of Calvary that was an indispensable element of the atoning sacrifice. As Mormon explained: “Now Aaron began to open the scriptures unto them concerning the coming of Christ, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and that there could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death and sufferings of Christ, and the atonement of his blood” (Alma 21:9; see also 22:14). In short, “he surely must die that salvation may come” (Helaman 14:15). This doctrine was taught from the very beginning.

Some three millennia before the coming of Jesus to earth, Enoch saw in vision “the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; and his soul rejoiced, saying: The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world. . . . [Enoch] looked and beheld the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, after the manner of men” (Moses 7:47, 55). Indeed, the cross is a sacred symbol. In that spirit, President Joseph F. Smith reminded us that “having been born anew, which is the putting away of the old man sin, and putting on of the man Christ Jesus, we have become soldiers of the Cross, having enlisted under the banner of Jehovah for time and for eternity.”⁴

Gethsemane and Golgotha

“We, the Latter-day Saints, take the liberty of believing more than our Christian brethren: we not only believe . . . the Bible, but . . . the whole of the plan of salvation that Jesus has given to us. Do we differ from others who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? No, only in believing more.”⁵ Professor Douglas Davies of Durham University in England has written: “Christians have paid relatively little attention to what befell Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane compared to what happened to him at the Last Supper and on Calvary. This is as true for artists as it is for theologians. There are innumerable paintings of the Crucifixion but relatively few dealing with Christ’s Passion in the garden. So, too, with theology: there is much written about the Eucharist and Christ’s death but much less on his personal trial in the garden.” Davies goes on to describe the Master’s anguish in Gethsemane as a betrayal of sorts, one instance among many during the long hours of Atonement in which Jesus was left alone, this time by the Father Himself.⁶

In fact, one of the distinctive teachings of Mormonism is the central role of Gethsemane—that our Lord’s suffering in the Garden was not simply an awful anticipation of Calvary, but that it was also redemptive in nature. Luke is the only Gospel writer who mentions that the Savior’s agony in the Garden was of such magnitude that it caused him to sweat blood. This passage is disputed by some biblical scholars who identify it as of later origin and one that could have been utilized or omitted by those involved in the centuries-long controversy over the humanity and divinity of Jesus.⁷ We know from King Benjamin (see Mosiah 3:7) as well as from a revelation to Joseph Smith (see D&C 19:18) that the sobering incident of the bloody sweat was historical, real, and meaningful. We know further from President Brigham Young that the withdrawal of the Father’s Spirit from His Son—a direct result of Jesus becoming, in Paul’s language, “sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21; see also Galatians 3:13) and thereby assuming the burden and effects of our temptations, sins, pains, afflictions, infirmities, and sicknesses (see Alma 7:11–13)—is what caused the only perfect being to bleed from every pore.⁸

It is inevitable that over time individuals and whole faith communities begin to define themselves, at least to some extent, against what others believe and thus emphasize most strongly those doctrinal distinctives that make them who they are. So it was with the hours of the Atonement. Because we had come to know, through the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants, the purposes for the Master’s pains in the Garden, we seem to have begun to place a greater stress upon Gethsemane than upon the cross. As time has passed, however, the leaders of the Church have begun to emphasize the need for a balance, to speak of the importance of both Gethsemane and the Crucifixion and to emphasize that what began in Gethsemane was completed on Golgotha.

At a First Presidency Christmas devotional, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “We honor His birth. But without His death that birth would have been but one more birth. It was the redemption which He worked out in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the cross of Calvary which made His gift immortal, universal, and everlasting.”⁹

More recently, President Hinckley observed that the way we live our lives—patterned after the only sinless being to walk the earth—is the great symbol of our Christianity. He went on to add that “no member of this Church must ever forget the terrible price paid by our Redeemer, who gave His life that all men might live—the agony of Gethsemane, the bitter mockery of His trial, the vicious crown of thorns tearing at His flesh, the blood cry of the mob before Pilate, the lonely burden of His heavy walk along the way to Calvary, the terrifying pain as great nails pierced His hands and feet. . . . We cannot forget that. We must never forget it, for here our Savior, our Redeemer, the Son of God, gave Himself, a vicarious sacrifice for each of us.”¹⁰

“Do you have a testimony of the Savior of the world?” President Hinckley has asked. “Do you know that He was the first Begotten of the Father? Do you know that actually He was the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh? Do you know that He left His royal courts on high and came to earth, born under the humblest of circumstances? He walked the dusty roads of Palestine, and gave His life on the cross of Calvary for you and me.”¹¹

There are some 341 hymns and anthems within the Latter-day Saint hymnal. Many of the hymns are written by devoted Protestant or Catholic Christians, and a surprising number are written by Latter-day Saints. All of them have been approved by the leadership of the Church, the Church music department, and the correlation department. There are scores

of hymns that give voice to our desire to submit and surrender to the Almighty, praise Him for his goodness and grace, and petition for forgiveness, renewal, comfort, peace, strength, and eternal life. Of especial importance are those hymns to be sung prior to the administration of the sacrament, for they focus specifically on our Lord's suffering and death.

Most of our sacrament hymns were written by Latter-day Saints. Through a simple perusal of the hymns we quickly notice repeated reference to the Savior's suffering on the cross, as well as an occasional reference to His agony in the Garden. This helps to highlight the need to tell the whole story, the rest of the story of "redemption's grand design."¹² The hours of Atonement wherein He who had come to earth in the name and by the authority of the Father to ransom fallen men and women and to open the gate to glorified immortality, were spent in incomprehensible agony, in awful alienation, in a struggle against the forces of death and hell,¹³ first among the olive trees and then on an accursed tree between two thieves. We cannot understate the price Jesus paid. We must not forget what the Messiah went through.

Conclusion

No doctrine is more important than the doctrine of Christ—the good news or glad tidings that He came into the world to teach, testify, inspire, lift, heal, suffer, bleed, die, and rise from the tomb (see 3 Nephi 27:13–14; see also D&C 76:40–42). We must strive to teach these truths with passion, plainness, simplicity, and consistency, knowing that only in this way will those who hear the word come to know what source they may look to for a remission of their sins (see 2 Nephi 25:26). In addition, those outside the faith will come to appreciate more fully who we are and whom we represent. They may not choose to join the Church, but at least they will

know that Latter-day Saint Christians have their souls stirred by the same message that fanned the flame in the bosoms of the early Saints, even the message of mediation, the herald of hope, the declaration of deliverance.

Yes, we do know something consummately precious about what went on in the Garden, and we are under a mandate to declare it as a part of the restored gospel. At the same time, scripture and the prophetic word affirm the following from President Brigham Young: “I would say to my young friends . . . that if you go on a mission to preach the gospel with lightness and frivolity in your hearts, . . . and not having your minds riveted—yes, I may say riveted—*on the cross of Christ*, you will go and return in vain. . . . Let your minds be centered on your missions, and labor earnestly to bring souls to Christ.”¹⁴ Note these magnificent and moving words written by Isaac Watts:

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.

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.

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! . . .

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.¹⁵

Our Heavenly Father “foreordained the fall of man,” the Prophet Joseph Smith declared, “but all merciful as He is, He foreordained at the same time, a plan of redemption for all mankind. I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and that He died for the sins of all men, who in Adam had fallen.”¹⁶ I rejoice in a beautiful world, in goodness and decency wherever it may be found, “but God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

Notes

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1. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Trusting Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 35.
2. John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 26–27.
3. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 6–7.
4. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 91.
5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 13:56.
6. Douglas J. Davies, *Private Passions: Betraying Discipleship on the Journey to Jerusalem* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000), 77–87.

7. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 187–94; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1971), 151.

8. See *Journal of Discourses*, 3:205–6.

9. Gordon B. Hinckley, Christmas devotional, December 8, 1996; cited in *Church News*, December 14, 1996; see also remarks at a missionary devotional, December 15, 2002; cited in *Church News*, September 3, 2005, 2.

10. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 4.

11. Gordon B. Hinckley, regional conference, St. George, Utah, November 24, 2002; cited in *Church News*, November 5, 2005.

12. Eliza R. Snow, “How Great the Wisdom and the Love,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 195.

13. See James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 613.

14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:33–34; emphasis added.

15. Isaac Watts, *Selected Poems*, ed. Gordon Jackson (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 1999), 44.

16. As reported by Matthew S. Davis, in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:78.