

3 - The Gospel Without the Cross

The Gospel of the Cross

The Cross is the universal symbol of the Christian faith. It is at the centre of a vast number of worship songs and hymns and is the subject of most written and spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving. Later we will consider the place of the Cross in Paul's letters. It is hardly surprising, therefore, if we assume the Cross is an essential and central part of the Gospel. We might express this Gospel along these lines, borrowing from the famous John 3:16:

God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son to die on the Cross as punishment for our sins so that whoever believes in him shall not be condemned for their sins but receive forgiveness and eternal life.

Let us refer to this as "the Gospel of the Cross".

Can it be the Gospel if the Cross is not mentioned?

But this is not what John 3:16 actually says. Nowhere in these opening chapters of John's gospel is the Cross mentioned! This leads to a problem:

Can we say that what Jesus and the disciples preached before the Cross was truly the Gospel? Perhaps it was simply the best that could be preached until Jesus had gone to the Cross, and the true Gospel could only be preached after the Cross.

This is the conclusion that many have come to. But when we look more carefully at both the Gospels and the letters, we can see that this conclusion is wrong.

John Omits the Cross

The first three chapters of John's Gospel give ample opportunity to mention the Cross, yet John does not! John chapter 1 is John's reflection on Jesus as co-equal with God: "In the beginning was the Word..." This is clearly written from John's perspective after Jesus had ascended into heaven. He writes about the man Jesus in the past tense (v10): "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."

John even hints at the cross (v11): "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." John even refers to Jesus atoning sacrifice when he reports John the Baptist's testimony (v35): When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

So we can see that John could easily have spoken about the Cross in his opening reflection on Jesus' mission, yet he doesn't.

John chapter 2 presents another opportunity. At the wedding in Cana, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus Himself hints at the Cross (v4): "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." Jesus used this term, "My hour" to refer to His death on the Cross. This tells us that Jesus had the Cross in His mind from the very beginning. He could have explained how he was the true Lamb of God and how his death on the Cross was the true meaning of atonement. But He didn't.

Another opportunity arises at the cleansing of the temple in v19 where Jesus says: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." Here is another very clear reference early in Jesus' ministry to the Cross and His resurrection. But v22 shows us that Jesus chose not to explain this to His disciples. It was not part of His Gospel: "After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said."

Then in John chapter 3 John gives another reflection on Jesus' mission. It would have been so easy for John to highlight the central role of the Cross in obtaining our forgiveness. But He didn't (v16-17):

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Nowhere in John's overview of Jesus' mission in these opening chapters does he mention the Cross! We have to conclude that John's understanding of the Gospel did not have the Cross at its centre. In fact, the Cross was so far off-centre that it was off-stage; it was in the background.

We surely have to conclude that for John, at least, the Gospel can be presented without reference to the Cross, and that is what John chose to do.

Could Jesus have taught about the Cross?

We have seen that when John wrote his gospel he could easily have made the Cross central to the "good news", but he chose not to. This is very strange when so much of the gospel narrative is taken up with the final weeks of Jesus' life. Perhaps it was simply because Jesus Himself did not include the Cross in His Gospel.

Did Jesus omit the Cross from His Gospel out of choice, or simply because it had not yet happened? We have already seen two occasions in Jesus' early ministry where He was clearly thinking about the cross:

"My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4)

"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." (John 2:19)

There are numerous other occasions where Jesus made reference to His coming death and resurrection. Despite this He never took the opportunity to explain its role in paying for our sin:

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Lk 9:22-23)

"Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Lk 13:33-35)

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.' (Lk 18:31-33)

"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ... He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others." (Lk 20:13-16)

"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt 12:40)

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead ... But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." (Matt 17:9-12)

Jesus chose not to explain the Atonement

According to the Gospel record, the only time Jesus explained His coming death as an atonement was during the Last Supper:

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt 26:28)

The conclusion we must surely come to is that Jesus chose not to include the Cross or the atonement in His Gospel. John understood this, and despite the incredible significance of the Cross, and its drama, he did not modify his Gospel to include the Cross.

The Spirit and the Cross

The New Testament letters make it abundantly clear that the cross of Christ was necessary for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Without the cross there could never have been a Gospel.

It is the Holy Spirit that changes people's cold and rebellious hearts and enables them to believe and trust in Jesus. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are Born Again and made into God's children. Without the Holy Spirit no one could ever be saved.

The Gospel is completely dependent upon both the cross of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. But when we share the Gospel with an unbeliever, we do not need to explain either the cross or the working of the Holy Spirit. Remember that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16), not theological explanations of how God enables salvation to happen.

All a person needs to know is that Jesus is King and Judge and that He loves them and can save them from Satan's destructive kingdom if they turn towards God and put their trust in Him. Later they can learn about the cross.