

The Surety's Cross

By Horatius Bonar, 1867

"The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Galatians 6:14

- I. The cross is the interpreter of MAN.
- II. The cross is the interpreter of GOD.
- III. The cross is the interpreter of LAW.
- IV. The cross interprets SIN.
- V. The cross interprets the GOSPEL.
- VI. The cross interprets SERVICE.

The death of the cross has always been, above every other, reckoned the death of shame. The fire, the sword, the axe, the stone, the hemlock, have in their turns been used by law, as its executioners; but these have, in so many cases, been associated with honor, that death by means of them has not been reckoned either cursed or shameful. Not so the cross. Its victim, nailed in agony to the rough wood, suspended naked and torn to the gaze of multitudes, has always been reckoned a specimen of disgraced and degraded humanity; rather to be mocked than pitied. With Jew and Gentile alike—evil and not good, the curse and not the blessing—have been connected with the cross. In men's thoughts and symbols it has been treated as synonymous with ignominy, and weakness, and crime. God had allowed this idea to root itself universally, in order that there might be provided a place of shame, lower than all others, for the great Substitute who, in the fullness of time was to take the sinner's place, and be himself the great outcast from man and God, despised and rejected, deemed unworthy even *to die* within the gates of the holy city.

When the fullness of time had come, it began to be rumored that the cross was not what men thought it, the place of the curse and shame—but of strength and honor and life and blessing. Then it was, that there burst upon the astonished world the bold announcement, "As for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Greek and Roman, Jew and Gentile, prince, priest, philosopher, Rabbi, Stoic, Epicurean, Pharisee, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free, North, South, East and West—looked to one another with contemptuous impatience, indignant at the audacity of a few humble Christians, thus affronting and defying the "public opinion" of nations and ages; assailing the religions of earth with the cross as their only sword; striking down the idols with this as their only hammer; and with this, as their one lever, proposing to turn the world upside down.

From that day the cross became "a power" in the earth; a power which went forth, like the light, noiselessly yet irresistibly, smiting down all religions alike, all shrines alike, all altars alike; sparing no superstition nor philosophy; neither flattering priesthood, nor succumbing to politics; tolerating no error, yet refusing to draw the sword for truth; a superhuman power, yet wielded by human, not angelic hands; "the power of God unto salvation."

This power remains—in its mystery, its silence, its influence—it remains. The cross has not become obsolete; the preaching of the cross has not ceased to be powerful and effectual! There are men among us who would persuade us that, in this modern age, the cross is out of date and out of fashion, time-worn, not time-honored; that Golgotha witnessed only a common martyr scene; that the great sepulcher is but a Hebrew tomb; that the Christ of the future and the Christ of the past are widely different. But this shakes

us not. It only leads us to clasp the cross more fervently, and to study it more profoundly, as embodying in itself that gospel which is at once the wisdom and the power of God.

The secret of its power lies in the amount of divine *truth* which it embodies. It is the summary of all the Bible; the epitome of Revelation. It is pre-eminently the voice of God; and, as such, conveying his power as well as uttering his wisdom. “The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.”

Yet is the cross not without its mysteries, or, as men would say, its puzzles, its contradictions. It illuminates, yet it darkens; it interprets, yet it confounds. It raises questions—but refuses to answer all that it has raised. It solves difficulties—but it creates them too. It locks as well as unlocks. It opens, and no man shuts; it shuts, and no man opens. It is life, yet it is death. It is honor, yet it is shame. It is wisdom—but also foolishness. It is both gain and loss; both pardon and condemnation; both strength and weakness; both joy and sorrow; both love and hatred; both medicine and poison; both hope and despair. It is grace, yet it is righteousness; it is law, yet it is deliverance from law; it is Christ’s humiliation, yet it is Christ’s exaltation; it is Satan’s victory, yet it is Satan’s defeat; it is the gate of heaven and the gate of hell.

Let us look at the cross as the divine proclamation and interpretation of the things of God; the key to his character, his word, his ways, his purposes; the clue to the intricacies of the world’s and the Church’s history.

I. The cross is the interpreter of MAN.

By means of it God has brought out to view—what is in man. In the cross man has spoken out. He has exhibited himself, and made unconscious confession of his feelings, especially in reference to God—to his Being, his authority, his character, his law, his love. Though “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23) were at work in the dreadful transaction—yet it was man who erected the cross, and nailed the Son of God to it. Permitted by God to give vent to the feelings of his heart, and placed in circumstances the least likely to call forth anything but love, he thus expressed them—in hatred of God and of his incarnate Son. Reckoning the death of the cross the worst of all deaths—man deems it the fittest for the Son of God. Thus, the enmity of the natural heart speaks out, and man not only confesses publicly that he is a hater of God—but he takes pains to show the intensity of his hatred. No, he glories in his shame, crying aloud, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” “This is the heir, come let us kill him!” “Not this man—but Barabbas!” The cross thus interpreted man; drew the mask of *pretended religion* from his face; and exhibited a soul overflowing with the malignity of hell.

You say, “I don’t hate God. I may be indifferent to him; he may not be in all my thoughts; but I don’t hate him.” Then, what does that cross mean?—Love, hatred, indifference—which? Does love demand the death of the loved One? Does indifference crucify its objects? Look at your hands! Are they not red with blood? Whose blood is that? The blood of God’s own Son! No—neither love nor indifference shed that blood. It was hatred that did it! Enmity—the enmity of the carnal mind. You say that I have no right to judge you. I am not judging you. It is yon cross which judges you, and I am asking you to judge yourselves by it. It is yon cross that interprets your purposes, and reveals the thoughts and intents of your heart. Oh, what a revelation! Man hating God—and hating most, when God is loving most! Man acting as a devil! And taking the devil’s side against God!

You say, “What have I to do with that cross, and what right have you to identify me with the crucifiers?” I say, “You are the man.” Do not say, “Pilate did it, Caiaphas did it, the Jews did it, the Romans did it; I did not crucify Jesus.” No—but you did, you did! You did it in your representatives—the civilized Roman and the religious Jew; and until you come out from the crucifying crowd, disown your representatives, and protest against the deed—you are truly guilty of that blood. But how am I to sever myself from these crucifiers, and protest against their crime? By believing in the name of the crucified One! For all unbelief is approval of the deed and identification with the murderers. Faith is man’s protest against the deed; and the identification of himself, not only with the friends and disciples of the crucified One—but with the crucified One himself.

The cross, then, was the public declaration of man's hatred of God, man's rejection of his Son, and man's avowal of his belief that he needs no Savior. If anyone, then, denies the ungodliness of humanity, and pleads for the native goodness of the race, I ask, what means yon cross? Of what is it the revealer and interpreter? Of hatred or of love? Of good or of evil? Besides, in this *rejection* of the Son of God, we have also man's *estimate* of him. He had been for thirty years despised and rejected; he had been valued and sold for thirty pieces of silver; a robber had been preferred to him; but at the cross, this estimate comes out more awfully; and there we see how man undervalued his person, his life, his blood, his word, his whole errand from the Father. "What do you think of Christ?" was God's question. Man's answer was, "Crucify Him!" Was not that as explicit as it was appalling?

As the cross reveals man's **depravity**, so does it exhibit his **foolishness**. His condemnation of him, in whom God delighted, shows this. His erection of the cross shows it still more. As if he could set at nothing Jehovah, and clear the earth of him who had come down as the Doer of his will! His attempt to cast shame upon the Lord of glory is like a child's effort to blot out the sun. And as his erection of the cross was the revelation of his folly, so has been his subsequent estimate of it, and of the gospel which has issued from it. He sees in it no wisdom—but only foolishness; and this ascription of foolishness to the cross is but the more decided proof of his own foolishness. He stumbles at this stumbling-stone. The cross is an offence to him, and the preaching of it folly.

My friend, what is that cross to *you*? Is it folly or wisdom? Do you see, in the way of salvation which it reveals, the excellency of wisdom, as well as the excellency of power and love? Has the cross, interpreted to you by the Holy Spirit, revealed your own heart as a hell of darkness and evil? Have you accepted its exposition of your character, and welcomed it also as salvation for the lost—reconciliation between you and God?

II. The cross is the interpreter of GOD.

That "the Word was made flesh" is a blessed fact, fraught with grace to us. But incarnation is not the whole of the Bible; no, not half of it. It is not at Bethlehem—but at Golgotha, that we get the full interpretation of God's character. "Unto us a child is born" is the dawn. "It is finished" is the noon. The cross carries out and completes what the cradle began.

It is as the God of GRACE, that the cross reveals him. It is love, free-love, that shines out in its fullness there. "Hereby we perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). It is as "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious," that he shows himself. Nor could any demonstration of the sincerity of the divine love equal this. **It is love stronger than shame, and suffering, and death—love immeasurable—love unquenchable.** Truly, "God is love." In his treatment of the Son of God, man was putting that love to the test. In the cross he was putting it to the extremest test to which love could be put. But it stands them all. Man's most terrible tests but draws it forth the more copiously, and gives it new opportunities of displaying its riches. What more extreme test can man ask, or God give, than this?

But RIGHTEOUSNESS as well as grace is here. The God who spared not his own Son is "the righteous Lord who loves righteousness," and who "will by no means clear the guilty." We learn God's righteous character from the cross of Christ. For here is the righteous Son of God bearing the unrighteousness of men. How shall God both reward and punish at once; reward the righteous one, yet punish the substitute of the unrighteous? Surely righteousness will deal mildly with sin, when found laid on one so righteous, and so beloved for his righteousness? Will it mitigate the penalty, and spare the beloved one? No; it does not. It will not admit of the principle that sin is less sin, or less punishable, in such circumstances. Even when found lying on the most righteous and the most beloved of all, upon the very highest person in the universe—it must be dealt with as sin, and punished as truly as when found upon the common sinner. There must be no exemption, and no mitigation. How terrible is the righteousness of God, as interpreted by the cross of Christ! How infinitely holy, how gloriously perfect, how inexorably just—is the God who gave his Son! His love is no weakness, no good nature, no easy indifference to wrong and right. It is righteous love; and, as such, the cross proclaims it with loud and

most unambiguous utterance. All the divine perfections are seen here in harmonious glory—mercy and truth—grace and justice—the perfection of holiness combined with the perfection of love. A righteous Judge and a righteous pardon! Righteousness forgiving, saving, justifying, glorifying; taking the side of law in condemning sin, yet taking the side of love in delivering the sinner himself!

O wondrous, glorious cross! Blessed interpreter of God to us! Scene of the great self-manifestation, the great revelation of the mind and heart of God! O cross of Christ, tell us more and more of this grace of God! Preach reconciliation to the alien, pardon to the guilty, assurance of God's free yet holy love to the dark and foolish soul! Speak to our hearts; speak to our consciences; pour in light; break our bonds; heal our wounds—all by means of your interpretation of the divine character, your revelation of the righteous love of God!

III. The cross is the interpreter of LAW.

It tells us that the law is holy, and just, and good; that not one jot or tittle of it can pass away. The *perfection* of the law is the message from Calvary, even more awfully than from Sinai. The *power* of law, the *vengeance* of law, the *inexorable tenacity* of law, the *grandeur* of law, the unchangeable and absolute *sternness* of law—these are the announcements of the cross. Never was there so terrible a proclamation of law, and so vivid a commentary upon it, as from the cross of Christ. In the crosses of the two thieves there was the declaration of law—but not half so explicit as in the cross of the righteous Son of God. He who has most honored the law is the one whom the law refuses to let go; no, whom it compels to suffer most. All his life-time's honor of the law seems to go for nothing. It stands him in no stead, now that he has undertaken to answer for the sinner. There is no relaxation of law in his behalf. Law—unpitying, relentless, remorseless law—demands from him the double debt; first, the fulfillment of all its precepts, and then, the endurance of its penalties as if he had fulfilled not one of its statutes—but had broken them all.

Thus by the cross does God interpret the law to us; showing us, with divine expressiveness, what it is, and what it can do. It was law that condemned the Son of God. It was law that erected the cross, and nailed the Sin-bearer to it. It was law that afflicted him and put him to grief. It was law that shed his innocent blood. Surely, of all the many illustrations and interpretations which law has received in the world's history, there is none like this.

By the cross does God protest against all attempts to destroy or dilute, to mutilate or modify the law. Man thinks it too strict, too broad; no, affirms that Christ came to mitigate it, and to give us a salvation founded on a modified law, and obtained by our obedience to such a law. God, in the cross of Christ, says, I do not think so. See yon cross, and my Son upon it, bearing the law's penalty. Would I have made him to do so, had it been too strict? Did he obey too much? Did he suffer too heavily? Thus in the cross God upholds the law as well as expounds it; protesting against the idea that the gospel is only the law lowered and relaxed, so as to suit our fallen state of being; and proclaiming to us a gospel founded upon a fulfilled, an unmodified, an unchangeable law.

O man, read the divine comment on the law as given on the cross, and learn what sin is, and what righteousness is. Man, in erecting that cross, was no doubt making a mock both at law and at sin; he was refusing the love of God as well as the law of God; he was, like Cain, rejecting the sin-offering, and saying, "I need it not." But God was exhibiting to us the reality and the darkness of sin. **In the cross God was condemning sin, and showing how different his estimate of it was from that of man.** And there is nothing so fitted to convince, to overawe, to overwhelm the sinner as the sight of that cross. "They shall look on me whom they have pierced, and mourn." It is the sight of the *cross* that brings a man down to the dust; that produces genuine repentance—godly sorrow, such as law alone could not accomplish. Look, then, and be smitten to the heart by the spectacle of the Lamb of God on the tree, wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; "made under the law;" enduring the curse of the law, that from that curse we might be redeemed.

IV. The cross interprets SIN.

As the interpreter of law, it is necessarily the interpreter of sin; for as “by the law is the knowledge of sin,” so that which expounds the law must also discover sin. The cross took up the ten commandments, and on each of their “You shalls” and “You shall nots,” flung such a new and divine light, that sin, in all its hideousness of nature, and minuteness of detail, stood out to view, as it never did before, “the abominable thing” which Jehovah hates. Sin was on the earth before Sinai’s thunder awoke the desert and shook the camp of Israel. But it was hidden, or but dimly seen. As the flare sent up at midnight shows the whole ground and camp—so did the blaze of Sinai light up the law and discover sin. There was sin upon the earth before Christ died. But it was, with all the illumination of Sinai—but imperfectly known. As the lightning of heaven, more potent and penetrating than the most brilliant flare, bursting down at midnight on some plain or valley, lights up the landscape, far and near—so did the heavenly glory of the cross unfold, in dreadful vividness and infinite detail, “the exceeding sinfulness of sin.”

It showed that sin was no *trifle* which God would overlook; that the curse was no mere threat which God could depart from, when it suited him. It showed that the standard of sin was no sliding scale, to be raised or lowered at pleasure; that the punishment of sin was no arbitrary infliction; and that its pardon was not the expression of divine indifference to its evil. It showed that sin was no variable or uncertain thing; but fixed and precise; a thing to which God was pointing his finger and saying, I hate *that*, and *that*, and *that*. It showed that the wages of sin is death; that the soul that sins must die; that sin and its fruits and penalties are certainties, absolute *certainties*, before which heaven and earth must pass away. It showed that sin is no mere misfortune, or disease; but *guilt*, which must go before the Judge, and receive judicial doom at his hand. It showed all these, when it showed us our divine Substitute, dying the Just for the unjust; God lowering none of his demands, nor abating anything of his wrath, even in the case of his beloved Son.

The cross showed us, moreover, that, the essence of sin is hatred of God; and that man is, by nature, just what the apostle calls him—a “hater of God” (Romans 1:30). The law had told us but the one half of this. In saying, ‘You shall love the Lord your God’, it pointed to sin as the lack of love. But that was all. The cross goes farther than this, and shows us sin as enmity to God, and man as a murderer of the Lord of glory. Is not this a discovery of the malignity of sin, such as had never been imagined before? O what must man be, when he can hate, condemn, mock, scourge, spit upon, crucify, the Lamb of God—when coming to him clothed in love, and with the garments of salvation? And what must sin be, when, in order to expiate it, the Lord of glory must die upon the tree—an outcast, a criminal, a curse, before God and man, before earth and heaven!

V. The cross interprets the GOSPEL.

That good news was on its way to us, was evident from the moment that Mary brought forth her first-born, and, by divine premonition, called his name “Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Good will to men was then proclaimed. But the Substitute had then only *commenced* his mission of grace. Step by step the good news was unfolded, as he passed over our earth, doing the deeds and speaking the words of love. But not until the cross is erected, and the blood is shed, and the life is taken, do we fully learn *how* it is that his work is so precious, and that the tidings concerning it furnish so glorious a gospel.

The gospel is good news concerning a divine Sin-bearer; concerning that death which is everlasting life to us; concerning that blood which purges the conscience from dead works, cleansing sin, and reconciling us to God. The cross is reconciliation between us and God, and that is good news. The cross is the bruising of the heel of the woman’s seed, and the bruising of the serpent’s head; and that is good news. The cross is the solution of every question raised by law and righteousness, by God or by conscience—the righteous and honorable settlement of every claim that can be made against the sinner. And that is good news. The cross is the appointed meeting-place between the sinner and God, where the ambassadors of peace take their stand, beseeching the wanderer to turn and live, the rebel to be reconciled

to God! There the covenant of reconciliation was sealed; there peace was made; there the debt was paid; there the ransom was given. And are not these glad tidings of great joy?

VI. The cross interprets SERVICE.

We are redeemed that we may *obey*. We are set free that we may *serve*—even as God spoke to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.” But the cross defines the service, and shows us its nature. It is the service of love and liberty; yet it is also the service of reproach, and shame, and tribulation. We are crucified with Christ! And this brings out our position as saints. We are crucified followers of a crucified Lord. We are crucified to the world, and the world to us, by the cross of Christ. But besides this, we have to take up our cross, and bear it. It is not *his* cross we bear. None but he could bear it. It is a cross of our own; calling us to self-denial, flesh-denial, and world-denial; pointing out to us a path of humiliation, trial, toil, weakness, reproach, such as our Master trod. Yes; it is a cross *of our own* that we are to bear; not, indeed, of our own making or seeking—for self-made, self-sought crosses are evil, not good—but still a cross of our own. There is a personal cross for each Christian, which we are to take up and bear; a cross which is the true badge of discipleship, the genuine mark of authentic service. What he bore for us is done; it cannot be borne over again; the cross of Christ is not for any but himself to carry. But as he had a cross to bear for us, so have we a cross to bear for him, and “for his body’s sake, which is the Church.”

“Follow me,” Jesus says; and we cannot but yield to the almighty voice. He draws us out of the world—and we follow him. He leads us in at the strait gate—and we follow him. He guides us along the narrow way—and we follow him—our cross upon our shoulder and the crown before our eye. Smoothness, and brightness, and greenness, are not the features of the narrow way; but rather thorns and briars, darkness and dust, and ruggedness, all along; fightings without, and fears within. The road to Heaven is not so pleasant, and comfortable, and easy, and flowery—as many dream. It is not a bright, sunny, flowery path. It is not paved with triumph—though it is to end in victory. The termination is glory, honor, and immortality; but on the way there is the thorn in the flesh, the sackcloth, and the cross. Recompense yonder—but labor here! Rest yonder—but weariness here! Joy and security yonder—but here endurance and watchfulness—the race, the battle, the burden, the stumbling-block, and oftentimes the heavy heart.

In entering Christ’s service, let us, then, count the cost. In following him, let us not shrink from the cross. It was his badge of service for us; let us accept it as ours for him.

To the world the cross is an offence and a stumbling-block. It is so in two ways. It makes those, who have taken it up, objects of dislike to others; and it is itself an object of dislike to these others. Thus while it unites the saints—it divides them from the world. It is the banner round which the former rally and gather it is the mark against which the arrows of the latter are turned. For there are “enemies of the cross of Christ,” and enemies of Christ himself. Of them the apostle says, “their end is destruction.” Thus the cross is both life and death, salvation and destruction. It is the golden scepter; it is the iron rod. It is the Shepherd’s staff of love; it is the Avenger’s sword of fire. It is the tree of life and cup of blessing; it is the cup of the wine of the wrath of God.

O enemy of the cross of Christ, know your dreadful doom. Do not take refuge in fancied neutrality; reasoning with yourself that because you are not a scoffer, nor a profligate, you are not an enemy of Christ. Remember that it is written, “He who is not for me, is against me;” and that, “The friendship of the world is enmity with God.” That cross shall be a witness against you, in the day when the crucified One returns as Judge and King! The early Christians had a tradition among themselves, that the cross was to be the sign of his coming; appearing in the heavens, as the herald of his advent. Whether this is to be the case or not—the cross in that day will be the object of terror to its enemies. They would not be saved by it—and they shall perish by it! They would not take its pardon—they must bear its condemnation. The love, which it so long proclaimed—shall then be turned into wrath. The glorious light beaming forth from it, to light them to the kingdom of light, shall then become darkness; their sun shall set, no more to rise;

their night shall begin—the long, eternal night, which has no dawn in prospect, and no star to break its gloom.