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The Centrality of the Cross

By Tal Davis

Every Spring, Christians around the world celebrate the season leading up to Easter. The term Easter is not really in the Bible. It is found inserted once in the King James Version in Acts 12:4, where the Greek word *Pascha* should be translated "Passover." It is a reference to the annual Jewish commemoration of the Pascal Lamb of sacrifice at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:5; Deuteronomy 16:1-8). The word "Easter" probably originated in Europe when pagan Spring Equinox festivals were replaced by the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus at Passover time each year. I suppose the KJV translators decided to use what was, by then in 1611, the traditional term for the season on the Christian calendar.

In any case, Easter and Christmas are probably the two times of year when the Christian faith is most prominent in our culture. During that period, even non-Christians are almost forced to think about the basic teachings of Christianity and the person of Jesus Christ in history. Unfortunately, however, we are moving further toward the place where Christmas and Easter are so commercialized and the seasons so secularized that they are rapidly losing their spiritual significance.

It is sort of like when I was in college. One of the student clubs conducted a big Easter egg hunt on the main lawn of the campus. Present was none other than Santa Clause, who, when asked why the Easter Bunny wasn't there, laughed and answered, "You still believe in the Easter Bunny?" Substitute "Jesus" for "Easter Bunny" and you get

a sense of where many people are today spiritually.

Many traditionalists refer to the weeks leading up to Easter as "Lent." That term is also not biblical. Its etymology comes from an old English word for Spring-time. During the forty days of Lent, before Wednesday of Holy Week, many Christians commit themselves to living a more holy lifestyle. Often they just try to omit some bad habit.

Most evangelicals do not observe Lent, but, of course, we see the events of the Easter week as the central historical foundations of our faith. In this article and the next, we will examine the two most critical incidents in the life of Jesus: His crucifixion and resurrection. We begin with the central place the crucifixion has in Christian theology and what it means for us.

A number of years ago a college friend of mine went to Bangladesh to serve as a short-term missionary. While he was there he made friends with a young Muslim man. As the two young men discussed their beliefs, they discovered they actually had some things in common. They both agreed that only one God exists, that people need to live morally upright lives, that we need to honor the prophets, etc.

But when it came to the central issues, they found they were sharply divided. My friend told his Muslim acquaintance that Christianity teaches that God Himself came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and that He went to the cross and died for mankind's sins. The Muslim man was horrified at the thoughts, first, of equating a man with God and, second, that He could be killed.

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Nonetheless, the cross of Christ is the central and most critical focus of the Christian faith. To demonstrate this perspective, we will listen to the words of Jesus Himself as to why it is the key to our faith and why it is relevant to each and every man and woman who has ever lived.

In Luke's Gospel is recorded his account of Peter making his historic confession of the Lordship and Messiahship of Jesus. It also has Jesus' revelation of the full extent of His life and work.

"And He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered and said, 'The Christ of God.' But He warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.'" (Luke 9:20-22 NASB)

Just before this passage, Jesus was talking with His disciples. They had been together for a while so the men had gotten to know Jesus and seen what He had done. So Jesus takes the opportunity to ask them what people were saying about Him. They replied that some people thought He was John the Baptist, some said He was Elijah, others thought He one of the prophets returned. But then Jesus brought them face to face with the primary issue: "But who do you say that I am?"

In verse 20, Peter makes his great confession, "The Christ (Messiah) of God." Peter was right, but he obviously did not understand the totality of what Jesus was going to do. Jesus went on to tell them that He was going to have suffer, die, and be raised. In Matthew's account we are told that Peter, not seeing the big picture, challenged

Jesus' words (apparently he did not hear the part about being raised from the dead). But Jesus rebuked Satan's temptation as voiced through Peter.

"Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's.'" (Matthew 16:22-23 NASB)

Jesus knew well that He was going to have to suffer and die. That was His reason for coming. His purpose was to take the sins of mankind upon Himself. This is what we call the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. The Apostle Paul called Jesus the "propitiation" (Greek: *hilasterion*) for our sins. That term means He was a substitutionary blood sacrifice made on behalf of us to pay the penalty for our sins and to satisfy the righteous judgment of God.

"Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed." (Romans 3:24-25; see also Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10 NASB)

Jesus alone was qualified to bear the righteous justice of God. Some skeptics and liberal theologians have objected to this doctrine. They contend that it is unjust that God would place the sins of individuals on another, especially one who was innocent. So they have tried to downplay the substitutionary atonement saying Jesus was just the ultimate example of God's love and selflessness, but that His death was not necessary to literally pay a penalty for sin.

However, the great Baptist theologian W. T. Conner countered the critics by

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pointing out that the innocent always suffer for the sins of others (ex. parents and children) and that God did not lay our sins on an unwilling victim. Christ took our sins on Himself willingly as an act of absolute love. No one else could or would have done it but Jesus. He was the perfect and sinless sacrificial "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Thus we see that Jesus' crucifixion was essential for the salvation of all mankind.

In the next section of Luke's Gospel, we find further evidence of the importance of the cross. He tells the story of the transfiguration.

"Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:28-31 NASB)

Several days after Peter's confession Jesus took Peter, James, and John onto a mountain. While they were there, Jesus underwent an amazing metamorphosis. His appearance changed and His clothing became white and gleaming (literally like flashing lightning). If you have ever seen freshly fallen snow or pure white sand when the sun was brightly shining upon them, you may be able to understand what "white and gleaming" means. The point is that Jesus' purity and holiness was fully manifest.

As Jesus stood there, suddenly the prophets Elijah and Moses appeared and spoke with Him. Notice what Luke says they were discussing: "His departure which He was about to

accomplish at Jerusalem." Even Elijah and Moses, and all other Old Testament saints, who were then in their disembodied states awaiting resurrection, were depending on Jesus Christ for their salvation. They, too, knew Jesus had to go to the cross to provide for mankind's redemption. Although they lived on the antecedent side of the cross in history, it was still essential for their eternal life.

The same is true for us on this side of Calvary. We must depend on what Jesus did for us. He alone was able to take our transgressions, no one else, not even Moses or Elijah could do that.

The cross is central to the Christian faith. Without the cross we would all be hopelessly lost in our transgressions for we would be unable to atone for them. On it, Jesus suffered and died as an atonement for our sin. In the next article we will likewise examine the absolute importance of Jesus' historical resurrection.

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