


Text: Galatians 2:19-21, 6:14
Songs of the Passion Series

 2nd Lent Midweek
Hymn: *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*

Glory in the Cross

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: This evening we continue our series of Lenten meditations on the songs of the passion with the hymn we just sang: *In the Cross of Christ I Glory*. I admit that it's a rather strange selection for this series because the hymn never actually speaks of our Lord's passion in any direct way. There are no nails, no stripes, no crown of thorns, no blood dripping down. Just the cross which is being used as shorthand for all that our Lord suffered for our sakes. The hymn is a good example of how a poet can convey big ideas and portray grand images using very few words. But the lack of direct language about our Lord's passion explains why in older versions of the hymnal, this hymn appeared not in the Lent section but rather with hymns about the Jesus the Redeemer – although that might be a misplacement too because the words of the hymn never get around to mentioning our redemption either.

The hymn first appeared in 1825 in a book of some 88 hymns written by an Englishman named John Bowring. He was a polymath, which means he was interested in just about everything and widely studied in many fields. You name it: science, nature, math, poetry, literature, music, history – he was like a sponge for learning. Unfortunately his theology was not good. He was in fact a Unitarian, which means he denied the Holy Trinity, and therefore also the divinity of Jesus. The good news is that his bad theology doesn't detract from the beautiful poetry of the hymn – if it's understood from an orthodox Christian point of view.

The story goes that Bowring wrote this hymn while serving as the British Governor of Hong Kong. He had crossed the bay to Macao, which was the Portuguese Empire's version of Hong Kong – their own European settlement for trade with China. There he saw a once magnificent cathedral. It was over 300 years old, and time and decay had done their work. It lay mostly in ruins. But part of the very ornate front façade still stood, and over it a large bronze cross that Bowring saw reflecting the light of the setting sun. That sight reminded him of Paul's words about boasting in the cross and that inspired him to write about it towering o'er the wrecks of time. You may recall a more recent image like this when the attacks of 911 occurred and there appeared a cross of twisted steel atop the ruins of what had been one of the trade towers.

There's an interesting side story about the music this hymn is set to. Back in the day hymnals didn't include music, just the words. You may have seen some of our older hymnals in the history case in the vestibule that are this way. For any hymn, the pastor or choir director would have to select a tune that had the same meter as the lyrics. Anyway, the story goes that in 1849 Ithamar Conkey was serving as the choir director at Central Baptist Church in Norwich, Connecticut. The pastor was doing a sermon series on the seven words of Jesus from the cross. For a certain service *this* hymn was selected to accompany the message, but due to bad weather, only one choir member showed up to sing. They had to cancel the choir's part. Conkey was upset and discouraged. Later at home he sat stewing about it. It was in a dark frame of mind that he turned to his piano for comfort and worked out the tune we know now and that is universally associated with this hymn. He named the tune Rathbun in honor of Mrs. Beriah Rathbun, the one faithful choir member who showed up that day. The whole choir sang the hymn to this tune the following week. As Paul Harvey used to say, "and now you know the rest of the story".

Now let's get into the hymn itself. As I said earlier, the phrase "In the cross of Christ I glory" is from St. Paul and his claim to boast only in the cross; but it's a remarkable statement – especially coming from Paul. Recall that he had been a Pharisee, full of pride and self-righteousness. He imagined that with his Jewish pedigree and meticulous attention toward keeping every aspect of the law that he had attained the highest possible level of human perfection. And in his zeal to defend the honor of God and the faith of his fathers, he determined that it was his sacred duty to do everything in his power to stamp out the despised cult of Jesus of Nazareth. And then he met the resurrected Lord Jesus and his world turned upside down.

He came to understand that everything he thought was right was absolutely wrong. And he came to see that all he had been proud of was in truth offensive to the Lord – and also to himself. In the text we read he calls it "rubbish"; but that's a euphemistic translation. What he actually calls it is a crass term for what you wipe off your boots after wading through a feed lot. Paul who had been spiritually and for a brief period physically blind had his eyes opened to the truth: that righteousness in this life is attained not through what we try to do for God, but rather through faith in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus – and specifically in what he did for us when he suffered and died on the cross for our sins. That truth, the message of the cross, is foolishness to the world; but it is the power of God unto our salvation.

It's the truth that endures and stands over all the fading glory of mankind. All of our achievements, all the splendor of the world's empires, like that cathedral, crumble into dust. But the cross remains towering over all. It's the central truth of world history. And it's the central truth of Holy Scripture, which is expressed in the line "All the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime." It's what all the law and prophets were illuminating in their writings.

From this beginning verse, the hymn now moves us to make application of the cross to our lives. "When the woes of life o'er take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy" – here we're talking about life's difficult trials, when things are bad, we're mourning our losses or we're filled with fear. "Never shall the cross forsake me" – I can always look there to what Jesus did on the cross to save me to see how much the Lord loves and cares for me. That he would give his own Son to suffering and death for me, a miserable sinner, that thought fills me with peace and joy in the midst of life's trials.

Verse three gives us the flip side of it. "When the sun of bliss is beaming light and love upon my way" – that's the good times when everything is coming up roses and life is happy and sweet. "From the cross the radiance streaming adds more luster to the day". God's love for me in Christ makes the good times that much brighter and better. We speak of joys unknown to the world at large. The unbeliever who doesn't know the love of God in Christ can experience the pleasures of this world, but not like we can. They don't know the giver of the gifts or his gracious kindness toward us.

The final verse combines the two thoughts: "Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure" – that is, in all of life's ups and downs, sorrows and joys; "By the cross are sanctified" – they are made holy. They are carried into sacred space and washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. Through them all, the Lord is working his gracious will for us in Christ Jesus. The cross assures us of that, which gives us the peace that passes understanding in all the circumstances of this life, and "Joys that through all time abide" in the life to come.

All in all it's a beautiful hymn of comfort for the faithful. May we then join Paul in glorying in the cross of Christ now and ever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!