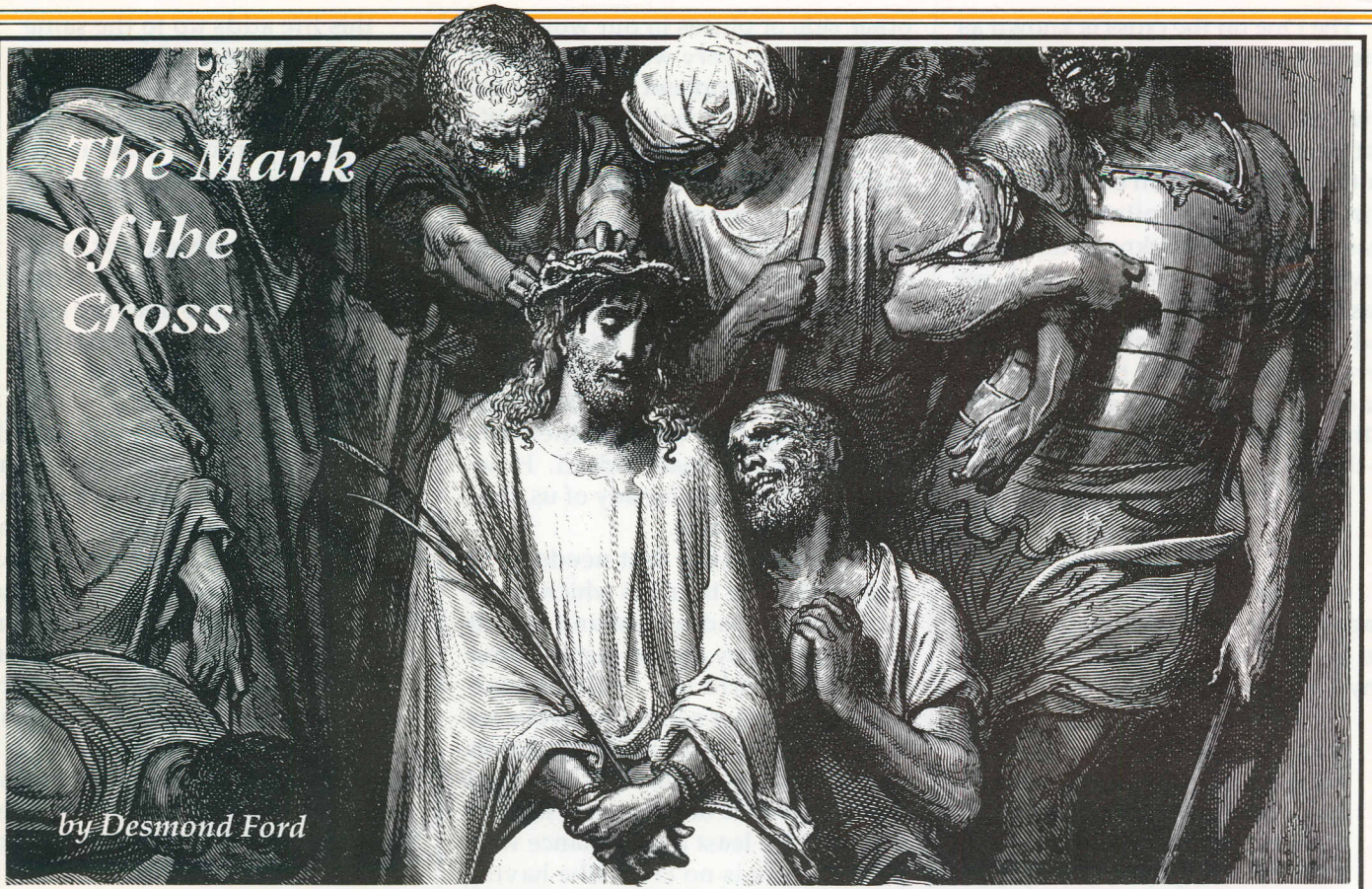


The Mark of the Cross

by Desmond Ford



Life is hell for most of us at some time or another, and sometimes for prolonged periods that seem aeons. That's why Calvary's pain can never be irrelevant. Recognizing the cross as in some sense a divine act, it must therefore be highly sacramental—an outward sign of something beyond itself—a pattern of universal reality. And it is not hard to see what is at least the one level of meaning that the cross has for everybody. There is no dodging pain, limitation, evil, inadequacy, and loneliness. *Every soul conceived must reckon with the experience of crucifixion.*

The very shape and outline of the cross is suggestive of anguish, for while it imitates the form of man, it contradicts his two strongest, natural instincts, the desire for action, and the yearning for rest. There man stretches out his arms up to meet no soft embrace, no kind reciprocating pressure; there his feet are made fast in the stocks; the iron enters into

his soul; yet there transfixed, he is there transfigured, and he finds on Calvary his true Tabor.¹

How often we use the term "excruciating" to describe what we or someone else feels. The term, of course, means suffering like that involved in crucifixion. No one in this world, be he king, multimillionaire, genius, a physical Samson, or a Miss America, can avoid crosses in daily living. A world like ours, governed by inviolable law, inevitably gets in our way with considerable frequency. But far more often, *people* do. For like porcupines, when human beings come close to each other, there is risk involved. Each day, everyone must choose how to deal with the pinpricks or sword-thrusts which will inevitably come. As John Bright has reminded us:

... the redemption of man entails a Cross ... to be sure we have no intention of abandoning the Cross. We enshrine it in the stained-glass window. We bow before it in

prayer. But we want no part of it. We are possessed of the notion that the Cross is for Christ, a once and for all thing of the past tense with little relation to the destiny of the militant and victorious Church; indeed we feel it to be the business of church and religion to keep crosses far away, so our faith in the crucified Christ becomes to us a sort of charm to protect us from life's adversity. But there is a sense in which no true Christian can in any case escape the Cross. It needs no great catastrophe. The path of life is, however pleasant, dotted with crosses which men must bear. The question is not if we should bear them for bear them we shall, but only what sort of crosses they will be to us; will they be the Christian cross or a thief's? Will we find in them dumb brute agony, or the stuff of redemption?²

The One on the cross is known as "the Son of Man." He represents us all. In one sense, all of life is a cross to which we are inescapably nailed—that is, inescapable till death. Life is a continuous crucifixion because of the pain, frustration, limitations, inadequacies, ridicule, darkness, mockery, bewilderment, shame, to which we must all be exposed in a sinful world and that continuously. There will never come a time in this life when shadows will not be cast upon our pathway, and when that pathway has no thorns.

But Life Is Not All Pain

Of course, it would be folly to magnify our ills and to pretend that life for us is nothing but crosses. Jeremy Taylor was right:

I sleep, I drink and eat, I read and meditate, I walk in my neighbor's pleasant fields and see all the varieties of natural beauty ... and he who hath so many forms of joy must needs be very much in love with sorrows and peevishness, who loseth all these pleasures and chooseth to sit upon his little handful of thorns.

Some of our troubles are but the

other side of pluses in our world. G. K. Chesterton very wisely remarked that our real complaint is, not that the world is not reasonable, but that it's not entirely reasonable. Are we not inclined to take for granted the fact that our environment is a relatively stable affair? Suppose it were entirely chaotic, rendering us quite at a loss as to what might happen next. "If the specific gravity of lead might at any time become that of thistle-down; if pigs might fly" or the White House turn into green cheese, then life would be a nightmare indeed. However bad things are for any of us, they could be a lot worse.

Another thing that needs to be said, is that the troubles which are as real as the bread we eat and the air we breathe, may also be just as necessary. The world is a "vale of soul-making." It is a school wherein we have much to learn and also habits and prejudices to unlearn. The least companionable of persons is the one who has the least acquaintance with pain. "There is no cross like having no cross." As we build muscle by effort frequently exercised, so it is with the sinews of character and personality. Kites rise against the wind and so do all of us. Dead fish float downstream. Only live ones can go against the current. To remain alive we must fight under all circumstances continually.

The Truth About Death

The cross is also the truth about death. One of the words our Lord uses from the cross is the word "today," and another is "paradise." Life may terminate today and paradise is much closer than we think, for no one is conscious of the passage of time in death. What is certain is, that as Christ's cross was succeeded by the resurrection, so it shall be for all of us. To see Calvary without the empty tomb is like considering our days to be all darkness. The morning cometh, however dark the night. Winter is followed by spring, otherwise all of life is nonsense. As Emil Brunner assures us:

If death means that all is over; if there is nothing more, then every column in

this life adds up to the same result—zero ... if there were no eternal life, this life of time would be without meaning, goal, or purpose, without significance, without seriousness, and without joy. It would be nothing, for what ends in nothing is itself nothing. But our life does not end in nothing, but that eternal life awaits us is the glad message of Jesus Christ.³

Unless we are first clear as to the meaning of life, why we are here and where we are going, for life's sorrows there is neither sense nor meaning. How you and I think of death makes all the difference to how we live. Only in Christ does human life find meaning. He did not idly say, "I am ... the life," and "I am ... the truth." He is the truth about all things, including life and death. If we are to be raised from the dead as he was, we must live in the spirit that he lived. We were born that we might become like him.

But more than that. All the gifts of this life are the result of Christ's cross. It was his volunteering in Eden to take man's place and his guilt and punishment, that saved the race from extinction there and then. Thus, everything we know that is good—life itself, food, drink, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear, our loved ones and friends—all are stamped with the cross of Calvary which bought them. Therefore, we own nothing. We are but stewards of the gifts of his grace, and all should be used to his glory. To live as though we were our own is to live as atheists and to die as fools. Only the right sort of life prepares for the right sort of death.

What Christ's Cross Teaches Us About How to Live

Christ on the cross spoke of Paradise, as if to say that life finds its meaning in its ultimate objective. Everything must be viewed in the light of its final condition. And if eternal life is the prize, every moment of this life has solemnity, and no choice I make in thought, word, or deed, is insignificant. A pebble can influence the change of course of a river, and



one careless choice can turn us away from Paradise. Bousset warns us:

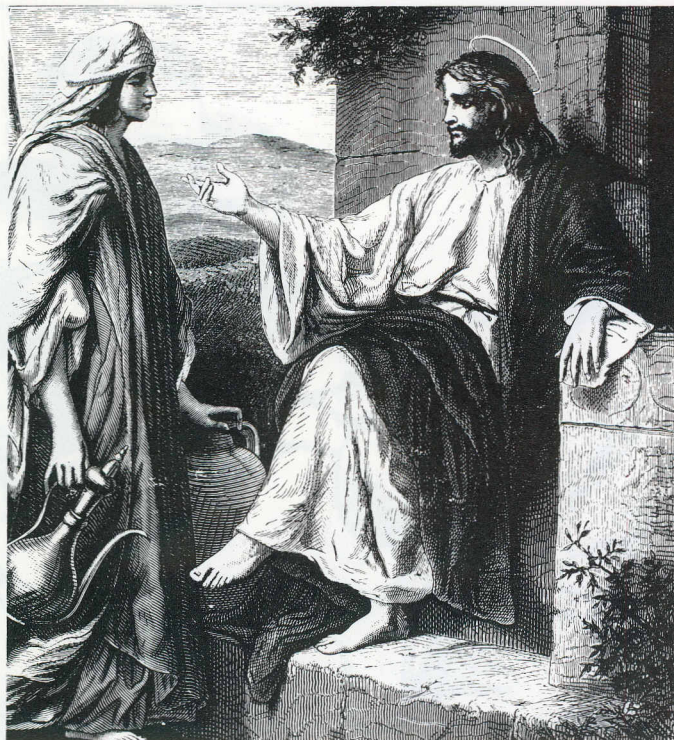
There is nothing in life to be regarded with indifference; our destiny, our condition, or our vocation, has no mediocrity. Everything tends to serve or to ruin us infallibly.⁴

This reminder, that each moment and each choice has eternal consequences for God and for ourselves, glorifies the whole of life. Everything now has meaning and value. The most humble activities have a glory to them. As Herbert says, "Who sweeps a room as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine." The thought energizes one to ever do one's best, knowing it is never in vain so to do.

Seeing life as a brief probationary period to prepare for the hereafter places all things in right proportion. The eternal destiny of myself and all I can influence should interest me more than all the temporary tinsel of human experience. Christ has suffered that we might have eternal happiness. Shall we be so demented as to neglect something so valuable?

Such reflections cherished enable us to turn the kaleidoscope of thought aright. Against the backdrop of Calvary and eternity, everything in this life assumes a new shape. When the cross is engraved in our hearts, beneath its shadow, the pride, the vanity, and folly of many of life's pursuits and values becomes apparent. Sensing that "out of the heart are the issues of life" and remembering his crown of thorns, our very imaginations will be dedicated to God. To crucify vain thoughts of pride, impurity, selfish ambition, irritability, and complaint becomes a prior concern. In thinking uselessly and aimlessly time is lost, no less than in speaking that way. The account we shall render for each shall not be very different. Furthermore, it is certain that in

choosing my thoughts, I choose my habits and my destiny. Paul spoke of the cross as crucifying him to the world and the world to him (Gal 6:14). In another place he tells us that once we understand the meaning of the cross we will recognize that be-



cause Christ died as our representative, legally we also died with him, and that therefore our sinful passions have no right to lord it over us any longer. The *Living Bible* translates a section of Romans 6 in the following manner:

Should we keep on sinning when we don't have to? For sin's power over us was broken when we became Christians and were baptized to become a part of Jesus Christ; Through his death, the power of your old sinful nature was shattered. Your old sin-loving nature was buried with him by baptism when he died and when God the Father with glorious power brought him back to life again, you were given his wonderful new life to enjoy.

For you have become a part of him, so you died with him, so to speak, when he

died; and now you share his new life, and shall rise as he did. Your old evil desires were nailed to the cross with him; that part of you that loves to sin was crushed and fatally wounded so that your sin-loving body is no longer under sin's control, no longer needs to be a slave to sin ... so look upon your old sin nature as dead and unresponsive to sin, and instead be alive to God....⁵

According to Scripture, there are three days between me and my old life, between the one resurrected from spiritual death and the one controlled by passion and pride. A grave separates the Christian from his past. He is now free to glorify God by loving and choosing whatever Christ loved and chose, disdaining and avoiding whatever Christ rejected. Like him, we'll be content with little and expect to suffer much. We must seek the

equanimity he showed amidst the persecutions and mockery of men. Patience, that step-sister among the virtues, must be seen in her true light, for us to bear calmly the inconsistencies of men. As love was the moving principle of Christ's actions, all our works are to be vivified by love, for it is the life of the heart as surely as truth is the light of the mind.

The Philosophy of Trial

First of all, we should see Calvary as the climax but not the conclusion, in order to know that none of our troubles are an end in themselves and neither shall they last forever. Our Lord enjoyed fellowship and feasting on Thursday night. Part of that occasion was joyous singing. Then came Gethsemane, the Trials, and Calvary. But Calvary was not the end. Easter Sunday follows Black Friday. The glorified body replaces
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the wounded corpse. The mountain of ascension succeeds the valley of suffering, a crown of glory replaces the crown of thorns.

The old platitude "This too shall pass" is ever relevant. An old unschooled saint at a testimony meeting said his favorite verse was, "And it came to pass." When questioned as to why he esteemed this passage so highly, he replied, "When troubles come, I say, praise the Lord. Dis thing ain't come to stay, but to pass." It is true, troubles are not eternal—they only seem so. As in certain inclement climates, the natives say: "If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes," even so, in climates inclement to the soul. Thomas à Kempis declared, "My son, regard not thy feelings. For whatsoever they be now, they will shortly be changed into another thing." All this was true even for Christ.

Christ's sufferings on the cross lasted six hours, then came sleep, followed by a glorious awakening. We, too, must see the resurrection as a sacrament as real as Calvary, testifying to sorrow's ultimate fruitfulness.

Second, Christ's cross was bearable to him because he lived in two worlds, not just one. Heaven and God were never absent from the Savior's heart. In his first and last saying on the cross, he uses the word, "Father." He knows who he is, he knows his real family, he knows he is not alone. Therefore, he ever interpreted the present in terms of the known past and the sure future. He knew that God attended the funeral of every sparrow and counted the hairs of every man's head. He knew God had delivered him from Herod's soldiers, from Satan in the wilderness of temptation, from that fox, Antipas, from all who sought to take him before his time had come. In calmness of soul, as though walking in Nazareth's fields on a sunny day, he could promise Paradise to the penitent thief, and make provision for his mother and beloved disciples. Christ knew that however unbearable his pain might seem, God would not permit him to be tested above that which he was able—the One who loved him controlled the heat of the furnace and

would ultimately bring him forth as gold.

Third, Christ endured because his mind was filled with Scripture. Twice he quoted from Psalms, leading many commentators to think that in his mind he traced from Psalm 22:1 to 31:5. Our Lord's preoccupation, therefore, was not with pain nor fear, but with divine truth which brought trust, patience, and hope. In harmony with a spirit that results in faith in the word of God, we find that Christ had no antagonism towards his crucifiers. He labored for them even while on the cross, as he did also for his mother and John. Because of his conscious innocence, even the weight of imputed guilt did not divorce him from his Father, to whom he clung even when exposed to all the assaults of hell.

In the light of the cross, our trials and difficulties, our pain and humiliation should be viewed as so many steps drawing us closer to heaven. Poverty and humility were Christ's inseparable companions in life and death. Should we seek otherwise?

If life is a school to prepare us for the company of God, the angels, and the righteous ones of all ages, should we not see in all events, his servants ministering to our good? To recognize in life's crosses (whether they be the whims, pride, hatred, and folly of others, or our own failures), grist for God's mill and agents for the accomplishment of his eternal designs of love, ameliorates the very worst sufferings. A cross loved is only half a cross, because love sweetens and renders all things easy. A cross embraced becomes as wings to a bird and sails to a ship.

How different this philosophy from the one with which we were born! For some reason or other (no doubt it is our natural selfishness) from the first days of our lives we feel that the whole universe exists for our gratification, and that we are the legitimate center of all things. We measure men and things by the extent to which they minister to us or threaten us. Rarely does anyone stop to question this erroneous approach to living. Instead, it molds us and all our actions and reactions. Calvary, with its pain and shame, is God's

protest against such folly. What a contrast is the cross to the pomp, ostentation, splendor, and magnification of trivia we see in the world!

If the cross is God's hallmark on life, why are we so slow to read the signals of our daily experience? Even with advancing years we are fools still. Impaired health, diminished strength, dimming sight, failing hearing—all frequently fail to tell the possessor that the rapids of death are nearing, and that preparation is imperative. We forget that we live in frail tents, and that soon our tent will be taken down, and we will after a time in the grave become that thing which has no name in any language. Only the Christian philosophy which rejoices in the believer's present possession of eternal life and heavenly citizenship can enable any to contend aright with life's overwhelming forces of deception, pride, passion, and pain.

In the light of the love displayed on Golgotha, need any believer fear severity from a hand that has been pierced for him? Was not Christ torn with the briars and brambles of our thorny life in order to make the path more smooth for us? Is not the path before us traced with his blood and has not every thorn been moistened thereby? Will the chalice of suffering be so bitter if we remember that before he presented it to us he first drank it to the dregs?

For the person whose heart has been touched by the Christ of Calvary there can only be one attitude towards the crosses of life:

Lord, I hate pain, but I trust you. Wound me, if you must, in order to cure me; punish me, if need be, provided that you save me at last; but this I especially plead, permit me not to crucify thee afresh by neglecting or transgressing thy commandments, nor allow me to stray from absolute dependence on thy merits alone. Help me to know always that thou art love, whatever the "seemings." ❖

Footnotes

1. Dora Greenwell, *Colloquia Crucis* (London, 1899), pp. 147-48.
2. *The Kingdom of God*, p. 279.
3. *Our Faith*, pp. 115, 121.
4. From a seventeenth-century sermon.